

Holmes of Kyoto

~Past Feelings and a Peaceful
Summer Vacation~

11

Mai Mochizuki

望月麻衣



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Mai Mochizuki

Kiyotaka Yagashira

Nicknamed “Holmes,” he has an incredibly sharp mind despite his gentle demeanor. He is currently undergoing training to learn about the outside world before taking over the antique store Kura.

Aoi Mashiro

A second-year university student who moved to Kyoto from Omiya, Saitama and began working part-time at the antique store Kura. She is developing her potential as an appraiser under Kiyotaka’s guidance.





Akihito Kajiware

An up-and-coming young actor. He has good looks but also tends to be the comic relief.



Rikyu Takiyama

Kiyotaka's younger brother figure. He admires Kiyotaka so much that he used to be averse to Aoi, but...

Ensho

His real name is Shinya Sugawara. He is a former counterfeiter and Kiyotaka's archnemesis, but after a series of twists and turns, he is now studying as an apprentice of a famous appraiser.



Yoshie Takiyama

Rikyu's mother and the owner's girlfriend. She is a career woman who runs an art-related business and has a first-class architect license.



**Takeshi Yagashira
(Manager)**

Kiyotaka's father. He is a popular writer of historical novels.



Seiji Yagashira (Owner)

Kiyotaka's grandfather. He is a nationally certified appraiser and the owner of Kura.



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Thank you for reading.

Last time, with the tenth volume, this series reached a stopping point between stages. Since the story has been speeding along, there were many events I hadn't covered and parts I wasn't able to delve into, so this eleventh volume will depict those in addition to the continuation of the story.

This time, rather than incidents, the focus will be on antiques, the city of Kyoto, the characters' pasts, and the continuation of their arcs. As the subtitle suggests, it's a peaceful summer vacation with memories of the past. I hope you will enjoy it.

Prologue

Summer this year was unusually hot. Day after day, the temperature exceeded thirty-five degrees Celsius, and the heat from the blazing sun was so extreme that the exaggerated term “scorching hell” felt like an apt description. The temperature dipping slightly below thirty-five was enough to make people say, “Oh, it’s not that hot today.”

The thought of becoming accustomed to this heat was terrifying, but at the same time, I was impressed by humanity’s ability to adapt. July’s stifling heat had made me fearful of August, the true height of summer. But when August came, the blaze began to subside. Temperatures were still over thirty degrees, but from time to time, a cool and pleasant breeze would blow through, making me feel that summer was already coming to an end.

“What a nice breeze,” I said, looking up and smiling as I wiped down one of the store’s front windows. “Okay, let’s finish this.” I diligently scrubbed the window with a washcloth.

I’d recently noticed that the display window had gotten a little dirty, but because of the heat, I’d turned a blind eye. Now that the weather had finally become bearable, I’d decided that today would be the day I dealt with it.

I polished all of the windows, including the display one. *Is it clean now?* I wiped the sweat from my brow and took a step back. I could see my reflection clearly in the display window.

“Okay, that’s good.”

I relaxed my shoulders and looked at the small, elegant store in front of me and its modest “Kura” sign. Having finished my work, I opened the door to go back inside. The chime rang, and I was greeted with the usual sight: a small chandelier, a grandfather clock, a sofa for visitors, and shelves of antiques and miscellany in the back. On the right side of the entrance was a staircase leading to the second floor, and on the left was a counter. The store always smelled like

coffee, which gave many people the false impression that it was an antique cafe. But this wasn't a cafe; it was the antique store Kura where I, Aoi Mashiro, worked part-time.

The first time I'd visited this store was when I was seventeen. At the time, I'd been surprised because the interior extended deeper than I had expected. Three years had passed since then, and now I was twenty and in my second year of university.

Time sure flies, I mused as I washed my hands and the cloth. I then picked up a feather duster. Since there were so many things on display, dust built up quickly if one wasn't careful. If the antiques weren't kept clean, the air in the store would stagnate. Thus, dusting was an important daily task.

I unconsciously looked out the windows as I dusted. Since I had cleaned them, the store interior was brighter than before, and I could see the people passing by outside more clearly than usual. I didn't know if three years was considered long or short, but at any rate, the view from here never changed. Since it was summer vacation, the crowds were bigger than during the off-season, but more than half of them were probably tourists. Those people always passed by this store as if they didn't even see it.

It's a little sad when I think about it. Even if they aren't going to buy anything, I'd still like them to come in and experience a bit of antique culture.

There was someone else I knew who often said he was happy just to have people seeing and learning about antiques: Kiyotaka "Holmes" Yagashira. Perhaps it was because of his influence that I had come to see it this way. I smiled, thinking of him.

Now then, what can we do to get people to stop and come in?

I walked to the front of the store and looked down at the tea utensils in the display window. They had designs with summery flowers like morning glories and irises. The display certainly wasn't *bad*, but since it was a busy season, perhaps it would be better to use more eye-catching items.

As I was mulling it over, the door chime rang.

"Welcome," I said, quickly smiling in its direction.

“Hey, Aoi.” Standing in front of the door was Akihito Kajiwarara, grinning mischievously and holding up one hand. He was quite a popular actor these days.

“Oh, Akihito. It’s been a while.”

“Huh? Is Holmes not here?”

“He’s still in training, so no.”

“I know that, but his term at Daimaru is over, right?”

I nodded. “Yes, it was supposed to end yesterday, but he went there again today to take care of some leftover work.”

Holmes had been training at Daimaru Kyoto since spring, and his term had ended yesterday, August 11. I’d heard they had held a farewell party for him last night at a pub, but he still went into the office today.

“Aw man, but his best friend came all the way here to congratulate him on a job well done.”

Akihito was also a close friend of Holmes’s. He’d always been a self-proclaimed best friend, but at this point, Holmes seemed to recognize him as a close friend too.

The actor humphed and sat down in front of the counter.

“But Akihito, just because he’s done working at Daimaru doesn’t mean all of his training is over,” I said, walking around to the other side.

“Huh, there’s still more? Where’s he going next?”

“He said he’d be going to Komatsu’s agency.”

“Wait, isn’t that a detective agency? He’s seriously gonna be a detective? It’s too perfect for him. He’s gonna end up staying there forever.” Akihito lifted a hand to his mouth and snickered.

That would be a problem. “I’ll make coffee.”

I went to the kitchenette. The quiet jazz music was joined by the sound of dripping coffee, and a pleasant aroma filled the air. Preparing coffee always reminded me of how Holmes used to be the one doing it in this room, and it

made me feel lonely. It used to be so normal for him to be here, but after he finished grad school, the owner ordered him to undergo training in various places. I hadn't been too concerned at first, thinking he would be back soon, but past the one-year mark, I began to feel uneasy from time to time. As Akihito had just joked about, I couldn't help but worry about what would happen if Holmes never came back to Kura, even though I knew that would never be the case.

Having finished preparing the coffee, I left the kitchenette just in time to hear the door chime ring again.

Before I could welcome the visitor, Akihito exclaimed, "Whoa!" in a weird voice.

Startled, I looked at the door and immediately understood. Standing there was Ensho with a mildly amused smile. The bald man was wearing a dark kimono and holding something wrapped in cloth. He hung his straw hat—which did wonders for making him look less like a monk—on the pole next to the door and grinned.

"Really now? 'Whoa'? That's a harsh reaction, Mr. Actor," he said as he sat down next to Akihito.

"My bad. You kinda surprised me," the actor replied without a hint of guilt.

Ensho shrugged lightly. "It's fine."

"Welcome, Ensho," I said, placing cups in front of both of them. Since I had made extra coffee, it'd been easy to prepare Ensho's portion.

"Thanks, Aoi. It sure has been a long time, eh?"

"Yes, it has."

The last time I saw him would've been...spring? Before Holmes and I went on our trip, he left me with a warning: "I know it's none of my business, but if you wanna stay on close terms with him, you shouldn't go. If you're dead set on going, you'd better be prepared." I realized later that it was because he'd sensed Holmes's nature.

I'd always thought of him as a scary person, but he'd mellowed out quite a bit

after Shigetoshi Yanagihara took him under his wing. I often wondered if he was actually a kind person who was just very clumsy.

Ensho stared at me and frowned.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No, nothing,” he replied.

“What’re you staring at her for? Are you admiring her?” Akihito teased, looking at me. “Hmm, well, she does seem prettier than before.”

“Jeez, don’t poke fun at me,” I said.

“No, I’m serious,” he insisted. “You’re definitely a university girl.”

I blushed and looked down.

“That guy really pisses me off,” Ensho muttered.

“Huh?” I looked up.

“Nothing.”

“Does Ensho come here a lot or something?” Akihito asked, resting his chin on his hand and looking at the other man.

Ensho didn’t say anything, so I answered for him, “He drops by sometimes when he’s in the area.”

Most of the time, he’d be on the way back from running errands for Yanagihara, carrying antiques. Yanagihara was a famous appraiser and an old friend of the owner. Ensho was currently training under him.

On one of his visits here, Ensho had told me that Yanagihara was quite fickle like the owner, and he sometimes found it bothersome to go out for appraisals. But he didn’t want people to come to his house either, so he often sent his apprentice to pick up the item in need of appraisal from the client. On the way back from those trips, Ensho would sometimes stop by Kura, and every time, he would show me the antique he’d picked up and ask for my opinion. Today was surely no exception.

“What do you have today?” I asked, looking at the cloth-wrapped object on the counter.

“Right.” Ensho gulped down the rest of his coffee and moved the cup to the end of the counter, out of the way. He unwrapped the cloth, revealing a wooden box with a calabash-shaped bottle inside. It had been fired with a milky-white glaze and painted with red, blue, and yellow flowers and birds.

“A bottle-gourd-shaped vase... No, I guess it’s a bottle,” Akihito murmured.

“Kakiemon, right?” Ensho muttered.

“Kakiemon?” I asked.

During Golden Week, Holmes and I had boarded the 7 Stars luxury sleeper train. I had seen Kakiemon’s work there, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that this bottle felt different somehow. I leaned in to take a close look at it. It was thin and glassy, which gave it a delicate impression. The red, blue, and yellow colors were very distinct. And most of all, its form and the aura it exuded seemed different from that of Kakiemon’s work.

“I don’t think it’s Kakiemon,” I said. “Based on what Holmes said before, this is probably...” I pulled a reference book from the shelf and opened it to the page on Kakiemon. “I knew it.” I nodded. “That appears to be a Meissen bottle.”

Ensho and Akihito gaped.

“Is this really Meissen?” Akihito asked. “But it’s shaped like a bottle gourd, isn’t it? I can’t believe it.”

Ensho didn’t say a word, but he seemed to be thinking the same thing.

“Umm...” I thought back to what Holmes had said.

“Kakiemon was the name of a potter in Arita, and it has been passed down through generations. It originated in the seventeenth century when an artisan named Kizauemon succeeded in firing red-glazed porcelain in Arita—present-day Kamamoto in Saga Prefecture—and took on the name Kakiemon. His works were highly acclaimed in the West for the outstanding quality of their decorative patterns, and starting around the eighteenth century, various places began making imitations of his style in hard porcelain, such as Chantilly and Mennecy in France, Worcester in England, and Meissen in Germany.”

As I recounted what Holmes had taught me, I showed Ensho the page with the picture of Meissen's Kakiemon-style porcelain. The pattern was different from the one he'd brought in, but it was the same in other respects, including the bottle gourd shape.

Ensho frowned. "What, so this is a fake?"

"It's not Kakiemon, but it's Kakiemon-style Meissen."

"Hmm, so it's a copycat," he spat.

"This is complicated," Akihito murmured, looking more closely at the bottle. "So, Aoi, what's the difference between Kakiemon and Kakiemon-style Meissen?"

"Umm, it's just my personal impression, but I think that compared to the original Kakiemon, the colors are more distinct and the glass itself seems thinner. Also, the overall atmosphere feels different, but I don't know how to explain it in words."

"Oh, so that's what it was. But you know, it's kinda nice to know that Japan's works are imitated by other countries. Art sure is great, huh?"

I smiled. "Yeah."

"All right, since I came all this way, I might as well look at some antiques." Akihito hopped out of his chair and hummed as he went to the back of the store.

Ensho watched him leave and then turned to me. "You're a full-fledged appraiser too, eh?"

"No, I'm only an apprentice of an apprentice."

My answer had been based on what Holmes had taught me, and even then, I'd had to refer to a book. It was probably only the most basic of basic responses.

"Nah, that's me," Ensho muttered, resting his chin on his hand. "All I do is run errands, day in, day out."

"Are you bored?"

He looked away awkwardly. "I go to the client's house to pick up an antique and bring it to Yanagihara. It's dull work."

"But I'm sure Yanagihara is trying to give you more opportunities to come into contact with antiques. And most of all, he wants his regular clients to know your face."

It was the same with the owner. I think he did everything he could to get his acquaintances to know his successor's face.

Ensho visibly gulped.

"Oh, sorry, it wasn't my place to comment," I apologized.

He shook his head. "Nah, you're right. I'm too impatient." He sighed loudly and glanced at the back of the store, where Akihito was still looking around. "I actually came today to tell you something."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." I nodded, wondering what it could be.

The moment he opened his mouth to speak, the door chime rang.

It's rare to get so many visitors in one day. Then again, this seems to happen a lot at Kura.

"Welcome," I said. I looked to the door and froze at the sight of a stylish, beautiful young man with a slim, tall build, slightly long bangs, pale skin, and a gentle smile on his face. "H-Holmes!"

That's right; it was Kiyotaka "Holmes" Yagashira, grandson and successor of Kura's owner, the nationally certified appraiser Seiji Yagashira. He was also my...precious boyfriend. I hadn't expected to be able to see him today, so my heart leaped with joy.

He looked at Akihito, who had come back from the other end of the store, and Ensho, who was sitting at the counter. "I see business is booming today," he said with a cheerful smile.

Ensho immediately stood up. "The original's here, so the copycat will take his

leave.”

“Copycat?” Holmes tilted his head. “You don’t need to run away just because I’m here.”

“I’m in the middle of an errand.” Ensho skillfully repackaged the Meissen bottle. “See ya.”

“Yes, good luck with the rest of your work,” Holmes said.

Ensho nodded and left the store. Holmes watched him walk down the street in silence. There weren’t sparks flying between them anymore, but there was still an awkward tension in the air.

I glanced at the hat hanging on the pole and exclaimed, “Oh! He forgot his hat.”

I quickly picked it up and exited the store. I looked around the street and saw him heading north, towards Oike Street.

“Ensho!” I hurriedly ran up to him.

He turned around. “What?” He seemed confused, but once he saw the hat in my hands, he understood. “Thanks for going to the trouble.” He took the hat and put it on his head.

“Don’t worry about it.” I shook my head and looked up at him. “Come to think of it, what were you trying to tell me?”

He averted his gaze. It seemed to be something difficult to say.

What could it have been? Since he stopped the moment Holmes came in, it might’ve been something he didn’t want him to hear.

Ensho and I were both apprentice appraisers. It was right after he had failed to identify Meissen’s Kakiemon-style porcelain, so perhaps he had wanted to complain about his shortcomings.

“Umm...let’s both do our best, okay?” I said.

He stared at me blankly and then burst out into laughter. “What the heck?”

“Um, well, I want to catch up to Holmes someday too, as crazy as it sounds.”

I had never been able to tell anyone this because I felt like they would just

laugh and tell me it was impossible. But since Ensho surely had the same goal, I found myself saying it aloud without thinking. If Akihito were here, he'd definitely laugh and say, "Dreaming big, huh?"

But as I suspected, Ensho didn't laugh. "Huh, that's a good goal. I bet you could become a better appraiser than him."

I pouted, thinking he was teasing me, but his eyes were serious.

"Actually, I hope you surpass him soon," he added. "It's probably impossible for me." He smiled self-deprecatingly.

I couldn't deny it. Ensho had seemed less enthusiastic ever since becoming an apprentice appraiser, probably due to his impatience. Perhaps he was frustrated *because* he understood that.

"Why don't you try painting?" I asked quickly.

He shrugged. "Painting's the thornier path. I know because I saw what my dad went through."

"I don't mean you should become a painter. You like painting, don't you? And you haven't done it for a long time, right?"

He tilted his head in thought, placed a hand on his hip, and looked at me. "Yeah. I'll consider it if you'll be my model."

"M-Me?"

"You don't want to, right?"

"No, that's not true." I knew that Ensho was an amazing painter. I'd be happy if he painted me. *But what would Holmes think?*

"It'd be a nude painting."

Huh? Goya's *The Nude Maja* immediately sprung to mind.

"No...no, no, no, no!" I frantically shook my head.

Ensho laughed. "I'm kidding. I thought you'd gotten a bit sexier, but I guess you're still a kid."

"What? Anyone would be flustered if you told them to model for a nude painting," I grumbled quietly.

“Anyway, what I wanted to do was apologize,” he admitted, sighing.

“Apologize?”

“I know it’s late, but I did something really bad to you before, and I’ve been meaning to apologize for a long time now. I’m really sorry.”

He was probably talking about two years ago, when his complicated rivalry with Holmes had taken a turn for the worse, leading to him purposely trying to instill fear into me. Holmes had sensed the danger and broken up with me. He had decided that by cutting ties with me, he would be able to protect me from Ensho. Remembering that made my heart ache even now. But the past was in the past, so I had already gotten over it. That wasn’t to say I didn’t want Ensho to recognize it, though. I was very happy that he had.

“Thank you for apologizing,” I said honestly.

He widened his eyes in surprise for a moment before muttering, “Thanks,” and looking away.

*

After my conversation with Ensho, I walked back to Kura with light footsteps. Upon opening the door, I saw Holmes behind the counter in a vest, having taken off his suit jacket. Akihito was sitting across from him. It was a familiar scene—one that had been common before Holmes had left for his training. My heart swelled with joy.

Holmes looked at me and smiled. “Welcome back, Aoi.”

“You too, Holmes. Are you done with your work at Daimaru now?”

“Yes, all of the remaining work and cleanup is finished.”

“Congratulations on a job well done.”

“Thank you. I’ll make coffee, so please have a seat.”

“Okay.” I nodded and sat down next to Akihito.

“So, when are you starting at Komatsu’s place, Holmes?” the actor asked eagerly. “You’re finally gonna be a detective, huh?”

Holmes shrugged. “It is indeed a detective agency, but I’ll only be doing odd

jobs unrelated to the business. More importantly, I'm not starting until September, so I'll be on summer vacation for all of August."

"Hmm, are you going abroad to buy stuff again?"

I was happy for a moment when I heard the words "summer vacation," but Akihito's question left me dejected. He was right. During long breaks, Holmes often accompanied the owner on trips overseas.

"That was the plan at first, but the owner came down with summer heat exhaustion, so we're staying put in Japan this year," Holmes replied. "I'm thinking of taking care of some things at Kura."

"Oh, so basically, you'll be back to working at Kura until the end of August," Akihito said cheerfully.

"Really?" I leaned forward, unable to hide my joy.

"I think you're a little too excited there, Aoi," Akihito said with a laugh.

Holmes trembled a bit and placed a hand over his mouth. He probably thought my overreaction looked funny too. His cheeks seemed slightly red.

Akihito looked back and forth between us and stood up, seeming exasperated. "Well, I should get going."

"Huh?" Holmes and I both blinked in confusion.

"I was about to make coffee for you," said Holmes.

"Aoi already did, so it's fine," said Akihito. "You haven't gotten to spend time together in a while, right? I'm in the way, so I'll get out. Just don't get too steamy in the shop." He headed out, leaving Holmes and me suddenly alone in the store.

He must be being considerate, as unbelievable as it is coming from him.

Holmes and I looked at each other and laughed as if we were both thinking the same thing. I cheerfully went behind the counter and stood next to him.

"Once again, welcome back, Holmes."

"I'm back, Aoi." He wrapped his arms around my back and hugged me gently. There was a faint jasmine-like scent in the air. His silky bangs touched my

forehead. It was ticklish but felt nice. "I wish I could do more, but we're in the store, so I'll refrain," he said casually.

I looked away, embarrassed.

"We'll continue after closing time," he whispered in my ear.

"Wh-What?" My face suddenly felt hot.

"Now then, I'll go make coffee," he said with a mischievous grin, making for the kitchenette.

"Oh!" I exclaimed, suddenly thinking of something. "It's been a while since I've had your café au lait."

Holmes stopped and looked at me in surprise. "Café au lait? That brings back memories."

"Yes. It kind of feels like we've returned to those days, and I'm glad."

I had been thinking back to when I had just started working at Kura. Even though three years had passed since then, both the view outside and Holmes's appearance had remained mostly the same. That said, his aura had become even more calm and mature than before.

"You'd be happy to return to those days?" he asked.

"Yes."

Being separated had made me realize that the time I'd spent working here with Holmes was invaluable to me. It was very precious and could never be replaced. I was happy to have him back at Kura, even if only for a limited time, and it made me want to drink café au lait like I used to.

"I disagree," he replied.

"Huh?"

"Compared to those days, I'm much happier in the present now that our hearts have become one. In fact, I'd love to brag to my past self," he said nonchalantly. "Now to make that café au lait. I'll try to make it taste better than my past self did." Smiling alluringly, he held an index finger up to his mouth.

And so went the happy afternoon that Holmes came back to Kura.

Chapter 1: Green Stars in the Milky Way

1

Is it just me or does it feel tense in here?

It was Holmes's third day back at Kura. He was wearing his standard work attire: a white dress shirt with sleeve garters and a black vest. As he went around the shop with his clipboard, checking the inventory, the manager was sitting at the counter, writing his manuscript.

Holmes was working, the manager was writing, and then there was me. This scene had once been the norm, and I was so happy to have it back. I smiled as I did my usual cleaning.

I glanced at the display window and its tea utensils with the summery flowers on them. I'd been thinking about changing them for something more eye-catching...but what would customers find eye-catching in the first place? I crossed my arms and hummed.

"Is there something wrong with the display window, Aoi?" came a calm voice from behind me. I turned around to see Holmes tilting his head.

"Umm, there are a lot of pedestrians at this time of year, so I feel like we should display something more eye-catching..." I replied quietly and somewhat hesitantly. It was the manager who had put those tea utensils on display, and he was currently sitting at the counter.

"Yes, they might be a little too austere," the man in question said, looking at the display window and nodding.

"Right, and I think it might be better to use Western works of art than Eastern antiques," I added.

Holmes's eyes widened. "Why do you think that?"

"Why?" I paused for a second. "I feel like, in general, people are more used to Western works of art because they have more opportunities to see them."

Western art like European china and paintings, Meissen, and Art Deco were often featured in magazines and on TV. Part of the reason was probably that they tended to have flashy, eye-catching designs. On the other hand, Eastern art was a world of wabi-sabi—the beauty of imperfection and impermanence. Their designs valued simplicity and modesty over flashiness.

“When I think about it, I’ve seen Western art featured in the fashion magazines we students often read, but I don’t think I see much Eastern art in them,” I added.

“Oh?” Holmes sounded interested. Much to my surprise, he didn’t seem to relate to this feeling. Thinking back, he might’ve had the opposite experience since he’d been exposed to Eastern antiques from an early age.

“It’s summer vacation now, so there are a lot of students passing by. I think we might be more likely to grab their attention if we put flashy Western art in the display window.” *That might convince them to come in and take a look.*

“I see.” He nodded. “I didn’t know that Western art was more recognizable than Eastern art.”

“Oh, um...I can’t speak for all ages. I just know that’s how it is in my generation.”

“Yes, age would have a lot to do with it. I’m surrounded by elderly people with a bias towards Eastern art.”

“That’s just how it is when you’re an antique appraiser, huh?” I was reminded of how different his environment was from the rest of society.

“Western art...” he murmured, stepping out from behind the counter and looking around the store. “Nothing quite fits. Everything here is austere...”

“It can be Eastern art too as long as it’s eye-catching.”

He folded his arms in thought. “Oh, I know,” he said, holding up an index finger. “How about a hanging scroll? Classic poetry is popular with young women these days, so we could display calligraphy of a poem about summer.”

“That might be a good idea.” I nodded firmly.

He quickly checked the inventory list and frowned. “The only summer poem

we have in the store right now is ‘Hikoboshi.’”

“How does it go?”

“‘My love prevails over Hikoboshi; pray remove the Milky Way screen that separates you and me,’” came a voice from a short distance away. The manager had answered in Holmes’s place.

We looked towards the counter, surprised.

The manager placed a hand on his head, seeming embarrassed. “Sorry, I happen to be writing an article about classical poetry.”

“It’s fine.” I shook my head. “So that’s ‘Hikoboshi’?”

“Yes.” Holmes nodded and explained the meaning to me.

“Even compared to the feelings of Hikoboshi, who can only see his lover once a year, mine are stronger. Please, remove the bamboo screen between us, which is a barrier the size of the Milky Way.”

According to legend, the deities Hikoboshi and Orihime, represented by the stars Altair and Vega, respectively, are lovers separated by the Milky Way who are only permitted to meet once a year. Their meeting is celebrated annually with the Tanabata festival.

“This is the summer poem in *The Tales of Ise*,” he continued. “It’s said to be composed by the central male character for the woman he loved.”

“I love you more than Hikoboshi loves Orihime, so please accept me.” It was a courting poem. *The Tales of Ise* is a collection of poetry written in the mid-Heian period. The author is unknown, but the model for the central character is believed to be Ariwara no Narihira. Because of that, the “Hikoboshi” poem made me imagine Ariwara no Narihira, who was praised as a handsome young man of the Heian period, making an earnest appeal to his beloved.

“It’s really passionate,” I said, captivated. “I think it’s perfect for summer.”

“Indeed,” Holmes agreed. “But in modern times, Tanabata is in July. Doesn’t it feel a bit late in the season for this?”

I hummed and looked at the display window. “I do think it would’ve been best to put it up last month...but it’s still a lovely poem. It’d be nice to hang up the

calligraphy and arrange some summer flowers in an Eastern vase. Oh, and it'd be even better if we included an explanation of the poem." I clapped my hands together.

Holmes nodded happily. "That's a good idea. In that case, I'll get the scroll and explanation ready, so could I ask you to select the flowers and vase?"

"Huh? You want me to do it?"

"Of course. Please design our display window with your youthful sensitivities. I have the mindset of an old man, after all."

"An old man?" I couldn't help but laugh.

"I was hoping you'd say, 'That's not true.'"

"But it *is* true."

This time, Holmes was the one to laugh. "You never pull your punches. That's the Aoi I know."

"Th-That's not..."

As we were talking, the manager looked down at his manuscript and frowned. He'd said he was writing an article about poetry, but from the look of it, he hadn't been making any progress.

"Dad, do you want me to make some coffee for you for a change of pace?" Holmes called out gently, having noticed his father's situation.

The manager sighed and looked up. "No, it's okay. There's still coffee in my cup." He sipped the drink that had long gone cold. "Oh, I know. Kiyotaka, Aoi."

"Yes?" We turned around.

"I'm writing a column on classical poetry for a women's magazine. Could you tell me your favorite poems by women poets?" He looked away from his blank manuscript and laughed weakly.

"Huh? By women poets?" I was a little puzzled, but a poem quickly came to mind. I wasn't an expert on poetry, but there was a famous one I'd been drawn to. As I opened my mouth to say it, Holmes said at almost the exact same time: "The flowers' color has faded in vain, and so too have I as I gazed at the falling

rain.” By sheer coincidence, we had recited the same poem.

“Huh?” I looked up at him in surprise.

“What a coincidence,” Holmes said with a cheerful smile.

“Oh my,” the manager said with intrigue, clasping his hands together on top of the counter. “It’s by Ono no Komachi, right?”

The poem meant, “Just as the cherry blossoms have faded in the long spring rains, so has my beauty as I fretted in vain over love while gazing at them.” It was a slightly heartrending poem by Ono no Komachi, who was hailed as an unrivaled beauty.

“Why did you choose that poem, Aoi?” asked the manager.

I hesitated to answer because I wasn’t quite sure. In the past, I had selected another one of Ono no Komachi’s poems for the flower arranging club’s event: “Perhaps he appeared in my dream because I fell asleep thinking of him. If I had known it was a dream, I would not have woken up.” Naturally, I was fond of this poem too. But the reason I’d chosen it for the exhibit was that it matched my own feelings at the time. In the fading flowers poem, the speaker lamented that their own appearance had withered. It evoked sadness and loneliness, but for some reason, I felt beauty and strength in it, and that was what drew me to it.

I expressed my feelings honestly and the manager nodded, happily taking notes. I felt awkward because my opinion probably wouldn’t be of much help.

“What about you, Kiyotaka?” he asked, looking at Holmes.

“Like Aoi, I find beauty and strength in this poem. When a woman hailed as an unrivaled beauty grows old, will she truly be able to say that her appearance has withered? I think most would look away and cling to their former glory, unwilling to accept their own decline. However, Ono no Komachi boldly composed a poem about her present state. I’m sure she must have continued to be beautiful and dignified even as she grew old. Also, I can’t help but feel that by writing this poem, she shut down the people who were gossiping about her declined beauty. It really is amazing,” Holmes explained passionately.

“Ohh,” the manager and I sighed.

Perhaps just like today, people in the Heian period would also have gossiped about a beautiful woman as she aged. If the woman herself admitted to it, then they would have no choice but to fall silent.

No one knows the truth, but there's one thing I can say for sure: she was a strong, dignified woman who was capable of singing of her own decay.

"I see," said the manager. "Thank you; that was very helpful. May I write my column based on this conversation?"

"Go ahead," Holmes and I replied, nodding.

Just as the store was enveloped in a peaceful atmosphere, the door chime rang.

"Welcome," I said reflexively, turning around.

"Hey," answered a man in his early twenties with a reserved smile. He had short hair and a slim build and was wearing a shirt and jeans. He looked like a very normal young man, but his expression seemed slightly unhappy.

"Oh, if it isn't Hino," said Holmes, a little surprised. "Long time no see."

"Yeah, it's been a while, Yagashira." The man nodded awkwardly.

Holmes quickly introduced us to save me from my confusion. "This is Keiichi Hino, my senior in high school. We were both on the student council." He had told me before that he'd served on the student council when he was in high school.

"Hello," Hino said with a faint smile.

I bowed. "I'm Aoi Mashiro."

The manager moved to the end of the counter and Holmes gestured for the man to take a seat.

"I'll make coffee," said Holmes. "You can take a break too, Aoi." He pulled out a chair for me.

I sat down next to Hino at the counter, ever impressed by Holmes's slick manners.

"I see you've returned to Kyoto," Holmes said calmly, placing a cup of coffee in front of Hino and the manager and a café au lait in front of me. "I think I heard that your parents are also in Tokyo now."

"Yeah, they are."

I didn't know what they were talking about, but fortunately, Holmes explained. "Hino only lived in Kyoto for his three years of high school. His father was a general contractor and was relocated a lot for work."

"Oh, I see." So he wasn't originally from Kyoto; he just happened to live here for his high school years.

"I've been used to moving around the country since I was a kid, and it was fun in its own way," said Hino. "But the three years I lived here were special; or rather, I really enjoyed them." He sipped his coffee with a somewhat listless expression.

"Are your parents not being relocated anymore?" I asked.

"They've settled down at the head office. My dad got promoted too."

"Come to think of it, didn't you say you were following in your father's footsteps?" Holmes asked.

Hino hesitated for a moment before saying, "I did get a job at a major construction company that rivaled my dad's. But I quit the other day. I just couldn't bring myself to go to work...so I left after two years of employment." He looked down at the cup in his hands with a self-deprecating smile.

"So you came to Kyoto for a change of scenery?"

"Yeah. I've been on unemployment insurance for a month and a half now, but it's hard for me to stay at my parents' house. I tried to go on a trip, but I couldn't get into the mood for a tropical island vacation either. So I made up an excuse to go to Kyoto, saying, 'People are on holiday for the Bon festival, so I'm going to see a friend from high school to get his advice.'"

Holmes nodded in understanding. Knowing him, he might have already sensed his friend's plight.

“But when I got here, I didn’t feel like meeting a friend while I was in this state either. I was wandering up Teramachi Street from Shijo, and this place suddenly caught my eye, so I kind of just...” He rested his chin on his hand and laughed.

“When did you arrive in Kyoto?”

“Yesterday.”

“Did you go anywhere?”

“Not really. It’s crowded everywhere and it’s too hot. I was wandering around today since the weather was a little nicer, but I really don’t know what I’m doing here.” He sighed weakly.

“Is there anywhere you wanted to go? My father is in the store today, so I can take you there.” Holmes smiled.

“Somewhere I want to go...” Hino folded his arms and pondered. “When it was decided that we were leaving Kyoto, I realized I hadn’t gone to all of the famous places, so I went around everywhere. You know, the big ones like Kiyomizu-dera Temple, Kinkaku-ji Temple, and Fushimi Inari Taisha. It was fall foliage season, so I also went to Nanzen-ji Temple. I wanted to go to Eikan-do Temple too, but I gave up because it was really busy. Looking back, I kind of regret it. I should’ve gone even if it was crowded,” he mumbled with a distant look in his eyes.

“Shall we go to Eikan-do, then?”

“Uh, but aren’t you supposed to go there in the fall? We’re in the middle of summer...”

I couldn’t help but nod. Eikan-do Temple was famous for its autumn leaves. I hadn’t been there before either, though.

“No, that’s not true,” said Holmes.

“Huh?”

“I think you’ll understand if we go.” He took off his vest, which he wore like a store uniform, and put on a light jacket. “Dad, Aoi and I are going to Eikan-do with Hino.”

“Enjoy yourselves,” the manager said with a smile.

I looked up, surprised. “Huh? I can come too?”

“Sure, I don’t see why not,” said Holmes. “Only if you want to, though.”

“Yes, I do.” I nodded firmly and excitedly took off my apron.

“Oh, right, Kiyotaka,” said the manager, looking up. “Unfortunately, I think the owner is using the car right now.”

“Walking makes for a good change of pace, so we’ll take public transit.”

“Oh, that’s a nice idea. It’s a good day for a walk since the heat has let up. Have fun.”

“Thank you,” we said, opening the door.

Hino looked confused but followed us outside, pulled along by Holmes’s quick decision-making.

3

In order to get to Eikan-do Temple, we took the Tozai subway line to Keage Station. It was a fifteen-minute walk from there, which seemed a little far, but since there was a cool wind blowing today, it wasn’t painful.

“The manager was right,” I said. “It’s a good day for a walk.”

Holmes and Hino looked up.

“Yes, the weather is just right,” said Holmes with a smile.

“Yeah...” said Hino.

“Did you take the shinkansen to Kyoto?” asked Holmes. He seemed to be concerned since Hino was no longer able to go to work.

“I just can’t go to the office anymore, that’s all. I’m free to go out like this. Thanks to that, my dad yelled at me, saying I was acting like a spoiled kid,” Hino said bitterly, narrowing his eyes. “I thought I knew what kind of place the construction industry was because I grew up watching my dad, and the work itself was fun. My efforts took physical form, people looked up to me, and I was proud of it. But it was just too much. With deadlines, budgets, and the end of the fiscal year, I lost all of my personal time and began to wonder what I was

living for.”

And so he’d become so stressed that he couldn’t go to work. As a student, I couldn’t imagine the hardships of the working world, but I could tell how painful it had been for him and found myself choking up.

“Did you go to the hospital?” Holmes asked.

“Of course. My symptoms are still mild, but I was told that it wasn’t good to keep building up stress. That’s why I decided to quit.”

“I see.”

As we talked, a large stone monument that said “Head Temple Eikan-do Zenrin-ji” came into view.

“Oh, we’re here. This is Eikan-do Temple.”

“So this is it,” I said.

We turned right and came upon a wide path leading to the gate. It was surrounded on both sides by beautiful green maple trees.

“Wow!” I exclaimed without thinking. I was awed by the cool and refreshing scenery.

“This is...” Hino stopped and sighed in admiration.

“Maple leaves are beautiful when they turn red, but these green ones are magnificent too, aren’t they? Don’t you feel like your heart is being soothed?” Holmes asked.

“They really are refreshing.” I took a deep breath and felt the mountain air cleanse my body. “And there aren’t that many people here even though it’s a Saturday.”

“Yes, it’s only at this time of year that you can experience this wide-open spaciousness.”

“That’s a good point.” In the fall, you’d have a hard time even walking with the crowds.

We passed through the grand entrance and proceeded across the temple grounds. The green maple trees looked splendid in the sunlight.

“Eikan-do Temple was founded in the early Heian period by Kobo Daishi’s best disciple, Sozu Shinsho of the Shingon Buddhism sect,” Holmes explained. “In the late Heian period, a priest named Eikan opened a free clinic here to provide medical care for the poor, and at some point, people began calling it Eikan-do.”

“That’s Holmes for you,” I murmured.

“You really know everything, huh? We called you ‘Holmes’ back then too, and it looks like the name stuck.” Hino chuckled.

“I’m called that because of my surname,” Holmes said, giving his usual reply. “The main object of worship here is a statue of Amida Nyorai, famously known as the ‘Looking-Back Amida.’”

“The Looking-Back Amida?” Hino and I tilted our heads.

“It’s said that when Eikan was fifty, he was walking around the statue and chanting Amida’s name when suddenly the statue descended from its altar and began leading the way for him. When Eikan stopped walking in disbelief, Amida looked back over his left shoulder and said, ‘Eikan, you are slow.’ The statue is said to have remained in that pose ever since.”

“Huh,” Hino and I murmured.

We entered the Shaka-do hall and followed the path to the front garden. The ceremonial piles of sand in the dry landscape garden and the large gate in the back made for an excellent view. From there, we went to the Mieido hall and then the Garyu corridor.

“Garyu means ‘reclining dragon,’ and this corridor curves in a spiral shape, making it feel like you’re walking through the womb of a resting dragon.”

“Wow, it really is like a dragon!” I sighed in admiration at the winding stairs.

The green maple trees could be seen from everywhere. I knew they would make for an amazing sight in the fall when they all turned red, but green felt great in its own way as well.

“By the way, this temple was originally Fujiwara no Sekio’s vacation home,” said Holmes.

I tilted my head. “Who’s that?”

“He was a noble and poet of the Heian period. Two of his poems are included in the *Kokin Wakashu*.” That was a collection of classical poems.

“A noble’s vacation home is now a temple, huh?”

“Yes. When Sozu Shinsho, disciple of Kukai, wanted to establish a Shingon temple in Kyoto, he bought this building from Fujiwara no Sekio and turned it into a temple.”

Hino nodded and said, “Yeah, I think I know why. This place feels like it cleanses the soul.”

“It really does.”

The mountain air and green trees seemed to soothe one’s worldly concerns and sorrows. *What kind of person was Fujiwara no Sekio, who vacationed here?*

“What kind of poems did Fujiwara no Sekio write?” I asked.

“He wrote about Eikan-do Temple,” Holmes said, looking up at the maple leaves. “‘Autumn leaves on the mountain rock face, without seeing the shining sun do they displace.’”

“What does that mean?”

“‘The autumn leaves along the rock face deep in the mountains, despite being beautifully colored, will fall, not having time to bask in the light. I, too, will quietly pass away, unable to bask in the glory of the world.’”

I fell silent in response to the saddening poem.

“Fujiwara no Sekio spent time here for recuperation purposes. It’s said that he wrote the poem about himself, to say that his life would scatter like the autumn leaves without bathing in the sunlight or receiving the sacred halo.”

Hino stopped and placed a hand on his forehead. “It kind of feels like you’re talking about me.”

“Hino?” I said worriedly.

“Ever since I was a kid, I was a good student. I graduated from a reputable high school and university and got a job at a major company like my parents wanted me to. It was smooth sailing until then, but after only two years, I quit.

Now, I really want to go help my girlfriend, who went back to Shiga to take over her family business. But it's not the type of industry where I can use any of the things I put so much work into learning. What would people say about me?" He smiled self-deprecatingly, tears welling up in his eyes.

"I don't know how others would see it, but I think that's wonderful," said Holmes.

"Yeah, right," Hino scoffed. "What's wonderful about it?"

"You quit your job before your mental health deteriorated too far. Many may think it's more noble to keep forging on, but quitting actually requires a lot of courage. You were able to do that for yourself, and that's wonderful. You may have saved your own life, Hino."

The man couldn't say anything in response to Holmes's firm words. He still had a bitter look on his face.

"Also, I don't know what your girlfriend's family business is, but the things you studied will never go to waste, no matter what field you work in. Why does it matter what others think? It's not as if they're going to make you happy."

"I know that. Even I tell myself not to care about what others think. But part of me just can't stop paying attention to it, and it's annoying." Hino placed a hand on his forehead and grimaced.

"Yes, I think I understand. I'm the type who doesn't worry about what others think, but there are times when I find it annoying. If you can't help but be bothered by it, then you should follow the example of Fujiwara no Sekio."

"Huh?" Hino frowned.

"According to the history textbook *Nihon Montoku Tenno Jitsuroku*, Fujiwara no Sekio loved living in this mountain retreat. However, society criticized him for living in the mountains to recuperate. Perhaps he wrote that poem out of annoyance at their remarks."

In an age where social standing was determined by one's official responsibilities, Fujiwara no Sekio, a noble, found joy in living in the mountains, surrounded by nature. It must have been frustrating to be called pathetic by others. Even if he thought, "Be quiet; I like it here," the voices would still be

annoying. Hence the reason he composed the poem.

“The autumn leaves along the rock face deep in the mountains, despite being beautifully colored, will fall, not having time to bask in the light. I, too, will quietly pass away, unable to bask in the glory of the world.”

It was his way of saying, “As you all say, I’m pathetic and can no longer perform my duties. I can no longer have glory. I can only confine myself to my mountain abode and fall with the autumn leaves. It’s very pitiful, so please leave me alone.”

Like Ono no Komachi’s “faded flowers” poem, naysayers would have no choice but to stop upon hearing such a poem. It was also possible that he had written it to *seem* like a painful cry, when really, he just wanted to enjoy his mountain life in peace.

Hino fell silent for a short while. Then he gazed at the green maple trees and chuckled. “My girlfriend’s family owns a guest house on the shore of Lake Biwa.”

“That’s lovely,” Holmes said sincerely.

“It really is.” I nodded.

“Yeah, it’s a great lodge. But her parents are old now, and she’s having a hard time on her own. I wanted to propose to her and ask her to let me help with the family business, but I couldn’t do it because I was afraid of what my dad and others would say. I think I should listen to you and do what Fujiwara no Sekio did. Before anyone can complain, I’ll say, ‘I’m an idiot who worked hard to graduate from a good school, got a job at a big company, and quit after two years. On top of that, I have to ask my fiancée’s family to give me a job. Pathetic, huh?’” Hino had a much brighter expression on his face now.

“That’s the spirit,” Holmes said with a laugh. “I understand why you came to see me now.”

“Huh?”

“Did you feel like we were in the same boat because I went to grad school at Kyoto U only to end up inheriting a small antique store?” He chuckled.

Hino gave an awkward laugh. Apparently, Holmes had hit the nail on the head.

I'm sure that he also used to wonder why Holmes would do such a thing.

"Everyone has different values," Holmes said. "What's important is what *you* want to do."

"Yeah," Hino muttered. "I'm glad I came here. Thanks."

"It was nothing," Holmes replied with a smile. "Let me know when you get that job at the guest house. I'd love to come visit."

"Yeah, feel free to come with your girlfriend." Hino grinned at us.

I choked on my words, but Holmes nodded and said, "I will."

"Oh, so she really is your girlfriend. I thought that might be the case, which is why I tried to fish out the answer just now."

"No, Aoi isn't really my girlfriend..."

His denial shocked me. *Does he not want people to think I'm his girlfriend?*

"She's essentially my fiancée," he declared.

"Fiancée?" Hino repeated, stunned.

I looked down, embarrassed. From the look of it, after going on our trip together, I had changed from "girlfriend" to "fiancée" in Holmes's mind.

"By the way, what do you mean by 'essentially'?" Hino asked.

"I haven't formally asked her parents for her hand in marriage yet," Holmes replied.

"Oh, I see." Hino nodded in understanding.

"More importantly..."

"Yeah?"

"If I may comment on something, I think the biggest obstacle in your way isn't your parents or society, but proposing to your girlfriend. What are your chances of success looking like?"

"Oh." Hino froze. "Well...we've been going out for a long time, so I'd like to

believe I have a shot. I'm a little nervous, but I'll try my best."

"I understand. Please do."

"You understand?"

"I proposed not too long ago myself."

"Huh? You proposed? Really?" Hino goggled in disbelief.

"Really." Holmes looked at me. "Right?"

I was too embarrassed to say anything.

"It was so nerve-racking," Holmes continued. "I was so nervous that my hands were shaking. I'd never felt that way before in my life."

Hino laughed and nodded as if he were listening to a joke. Meanwhile, I remembered how Holmes's hands had trembled at that moment and felt a surge of emotion in my heart.

"Man, I always thought of you as someone who'd never get married," said Hino.

Holmes nodded. "I actually thought the same of myself."

Hino laughed and looked at me. "Aoi, you must be amazing to be able to change his mind."

"Oh, she is. Aoi is truly incredible, you see—"

"Wait, Holmes, stop!" I tugged on his sleeve to prevent him from saying any more.

Hino put a hand over his mouth and chuckled, amused by our exchange. "I'm surprised, though. Who would've thought that even the aloof Yagashira would get nervous when proposing?"

"Anyone would," said Holmes.

"I'll do my best too. In the meantime, do you think I should bring flowers to the guest house? Or sweets? Wait, or alcohol for her father..."

"Why don't you bring all of them?"

"Oh, right, I'll do that. All of them. Okay."

“What about the ring, by the way?”

“I’d need to know her preferences and size, so I’m thinking we’ll go ring shopping together if she accepts my proposal.”

“In that case, how about preparing an empty ring box and putting a note in it that says, ‘Let’s buy it together’?”

“Oh, that’s a good idea. I’ll do that. Was that what you did?”

“No, because I know Aoi’s ring size,” Holmes said with a hint of pride, making me feel embarrassed again.

“Man, it feels like I got to see something special today.”

“I wish you luck.” Holmes smiled.

Hino nodded firmly.

As the sunlight shone through the trees around us, I was moved by the wonderful moment I’d been able to witness.

4

And so, we returned to the entrance and bid farewell to Hino, who said he was going to keep walking around the area.

“Hino has a really nice smile on his face now.” I sighed in relief as I watched the man walk away.

“Indeed,” Holmes said, taking my hand.

We wandered around, enjoying our stroll. As we walked, we came across a flower arrangement shop.

“Oh!” we both exclaimed at the same time.

“Flowers for the display window...” I murmured.

“Shall we have a look?”

I felt happy that we’d thought the same thing. We entered the shop, where a variety of flowers were on display.

“What would be good?” I wondered.

“I’ll leave it to your sensibilities.”

“Oh, that’s right.” I nodded. A certain flower caught my eye, and I walked up to it. “These are nice.” They were white bellflowers. “They almost look like stars.”

“You’re right.”

“Oh, but it won’t work if their symbolism doesn’t match the poem...”

“In the language of flowers, bellflowers represent eternal love, so I think it’s perfect,” Holmes answered with ease.

“That’s Holmes for you,” I muttered.

Orihime and Hikoboshi, and the Milky Way separating them.

Unable to come to terms with his feelings, Hino hadn’t been able to go to his girlfriend, but now he finally can. Speaking of which, Holmes and I were also separated for a long time because of his training, but now we can finally spend time together like this. It’s already August, but maybe the Hikoboshi poem is perfect for us right now.

As I looked around the store to see if there was anything else that could work, I found that they were selling green maple twigs too. Like bellflowers, maple leaves had a star-like shape.

“Oh, how about arranging green maple leaves with them?” I asked eagerly. “They look like stars too.”

“I think it’s a great idea.” Holmes smiled elegantly, making me suddenly feel embarrassed about my enthusiastic outburst.

“Thank you,” I said quietly, looking down at the white bellflowers. “I wonder which vase would be nice...”

Since the white bellflowers look like stars, an indigo vase would look like the night sky. Or maybe black would be better to accentuate the white?

I remembered a certain vase we had in the store. It was a glossy black color with beautiful curves. “Oh right, how about the black Satsuma vase?”

“Ah, I see. A jet-black vase with pure white bellflowers and fresh green maple

leaves. It reminds one of the night sky, and the green gives the high-contrast beauty a sense of softness. I think it's a wonderful idea."

"Great. I'm glad you like it."

We headed back to Kura with the white bellflowers and green maple leaves. A faint white moon and stars were starting to show in the eastern sky. The green maple leaves shone like stars as they reflected the setting sun.

It was a refreshing summer evening.

Chapter 2: Moonlit Feast

1

Since Holmes had finished his training at Daimaru Kyoto and returned to Kura, we decided to throw a party for him at the Yagashira residence. It was Rikyu who suggested it. The owner had grumbled, “He isn’t done with all of his training yet,” but since he was a party-lover by nature, he seemed happy to celebrate with everyone.

The people gathered in the first-floor party room were Holmes (our guest of honor), Rikyu, Yoshie, the manager, the owner, Akihito, Ueda, Mieko, and myself. On the large table were the meatloaf I had made, the deep-fried chicken drumettes Yoshie had made, the paella Rikyu had made, the pork stew and braised chicken and vegetables Mieko had brought, the roast beef Ueda had brought, and seafood salad, cheese, and dry-cured ham.

“The food’s kind of mismatched,” Rikyu remarked with a chuckle as he poured drinks into everyone’s glasses.

Mieko slumped her shoulders apologetically. “Forgive me for bringing such old-fashioned dishes.”

“Don’t worry about it, Mieko,” said Holmes with a smile. “These are all things I love. Thank you.”

“That’s a relief,” the woman replied, placing a hand on her chest.

“It’s good to have variety,” added Akihito. “Everything seriously looks great.”

“By the way, I highly recommend my homemade roast beef,” said Ueda, sticking out his chest with pride.

The manager turned around, surprised. “You made this roast beef yourself?”

“That’s right.”

“I’m impressed. I thought for sure that you’d bought it ready-made from a

department store.”

“When a man gets old, he starts making things like roast beef and soba noodles.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that about men and soba. The urge hasn’t reached me yet, though.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at their conversation. “Now that you mention it, my dad recently got into making soba too.”

Holmes, who hadn’t seemed interested in the topic, suddenly turned to me and said, “Your dad is making soba? I’d like to try it someday.”

“Oh, how about mine, Kiyotaka?” Ueda asked, leaning forward.

“Perhaps if the opportunity arises,” Holmes said, casually brushing him off.

The owner, who was sitting diagonally across from Holmes, burst out laughing. “You just want Aoi’s dad to like you.”

“Of course I do.” Holmes nodded without hesitation, a serious look on his face.

We all laughed at his predictable response. Rikyu, however, pouted as he took his seat. He looked at the owner and said, “Well, let’s have a toast. I know Kiyo hasn’t finished all of his training yet, but we can still acknowledge his work at Daimaru Kyoto.”

“Right,” said the owner, clearing his throat. “It hasn’t even been a year and a half since I told you to undergo training, but you’ve already worked at nine places now. I more or less expected this, but it’s still fast. All of ’em gave you positive evaluations, and many even wanted to hire you permanently. Though the terms were short, you gained valuable experience in several industries, and I’m sure you learned a lot. Since you’re taking a break before the last company, for now we’ll just thank you for your hard work so far. Cheers!” He raised his glass.

“Cheers!” we all said in unison.

Holmes and the manager toasted with champagne, Yoshie with red wine, Mieko and the owner with cold sake, Akihito and Ueda with beer, and Rikyu

with ginger ale. By the way, my glass was filled with champagne. Since turning twenty, I'd slowly been getting into the habit of drinking alcohol. I liked drinks that were on the sweet side, like umeshu and cocktails, and I still couldn't bring myself to like the taste of beer. As for wine and champagne, I liked some of the smooth ones. The champagne I was currently drinking had been bought by the manager, and it tasted really good.

Akihito took a swig of his beer, seeming content. "Oh yeah, I heard the owner came down with summer heat exhaustion." He looked at the old man. "Are you all right?"

"I was sick for a while, but I'm fine now. The heat this year is ridiculous," the owner grumbled.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"So, how'd it go at Daimaru, Kiyotaka?" asked Ueda from the end of the table.

"I realized how different the world of sales professionals is. Since the world of antiques has been insular for so long, being exposed to an industry that's always trying to keep up with the cutting edge was a very valuable and stimulating experience for me. I really learned a lot," Holmes said earnestly.

"Oh yeah, and Daimaru's manager celebrated your engagement to Aoi, didn't he?" the owner asked with a grin.

"Yes." Holmes nodded calmly. I, on the other hand, blushed.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Rikyu gaped.

"Umm..." I began to recount the story. It had happened shortly after Golden Week ended.

*

It was three months ago, on the evening of Saturday, May 12. I had been working at Kura since that morning, but after a sudden invitation from Holmes, I asked the manager to look after the store and left. Apparently, the manager of Daimaru Kyoto and the people from the sales promotion department wanted me to join them for dinner.

Our meeting place was the small police station near Shijo Bridge. Before going

there, I bought a matcha and hojicha set of financier cakes from Kyo Hayashiya along the Kamo River to give as a gift. Since that left me short on time, I decided to take the Keihan train from Sanjo Station even though the bridge was only one station away. I got off at Gion-shijo Station and felt a little nervous as I made my way up to ground level. As I walked west across the bridge, I could see the setting sun reflected in the river. The herons flapping their wings were beautiful, and I smiled at the sight of one of the Kamo River's characteristic features: the couples evenly spaced out along the riverbank. The restaurants in Ponto-cho had already set up their outdoor patios, making it feel like summer.

"Aoi!"

Before I could reach the police station, Holmes spotted me and met me halfway across the bridge.

"Hello, Holmes."

"I'm sorry for making you come out here."

"It's okay. I was surprised, but I'm glad you invited me." *Why so suddenly, though?* I wondered as I looked at him.

He gave a strained, apologetic laugh. "To be honest, this happened because I got carried away with my bragging."

"Huh? What do you mean?" I tilted my head, unable to imagine the situation.

"I saw Taniguchi again for the first time after the holidays, since she'd taken time off as well."

Taniguchi was Holmes's senior at Daimaru Kyoto. The sales promotion department had started up a project with the concept of giving the department store a more traditional Kyoto flair: the Ancient City Kyoto Project (ACKP).

"We were chatting in the employee cafeteria when she asked, 'Kiyotaka, how was the trip with your girlfriend?' and I cheerily said, 'Correction, Taniguchi. Aoi isn't my girlfriend anymore. She's my fiancée.'"

"F-Fiancée?!" I blinked.

"Yes, I'm sorry. I know I haven't formally discussed it with your parents yet," Holmes hurriedly added. "I proposed to you and you said yes, so in my mind,

you're my fiancée."

I gave a silent nod.

"The manager happened to overhear our conversation, and he exclaimed, 'Kiyotaka, you got engaged?!' Of course, I immediately clarified that it wasn't official, but then he said, 'Nothing's more important than confirming your feelings! Let's celebrate. I'm busy starting tomorrow, so how about today? Can you ask your fiancée if she's available?' And you know the rest." He sighed. "Sorry, I got carried away without thinking. I'm a stereotypical airhead in love."

I couldn't help but laugh. "An airhead in love? This is my first time hearing someone call themselves that."

"It's actually my first time saying it too."

I laughed again. "Anyway, that means they're congratulating us today, right?"

"Yes. I'm not sure if it'll be uncomfortable for you, but if you'd be willing to come..."

I shook my head. "Why would you say that? I'm happy about it. Like you said, we agreed to get married, so even if it's not official...I consider you my fiancé too." Saying the word "fiancé" out loud made me feel embarrassed.

"Aoi..." His eyes misted up and he put a hand over his mouth. "This is bad. I really want to hug you."

"What?! You can't—not here!"

"Of course." He slumped his shoulders. "Well then, shall we go?" he asked nonchalantly, taking my hand.

I was always baffled by how quickly he switched gears. Slightly annoyed, I turned my attention to the bustling Shijo Street. *I wonder where we'll be eating?*

I felt nervous but excited as we crossed Shijo Bridge. After passing the police station, we immediately turned north.

"Ponto-cho..."

In olden times, Ponto-cho had prospered as a Hanamachi geisha district. Now,

it was a small street that retained its traditional charm. Both ends of the street were lined with a variety of restaurants and bars specializing in Kyoto cuisine, innovative dishes, steak, skewers, and sushi. The round paper lanterns on the eaves looked enchanting under the sunset sky. Even though this scene had remained unchanged since long ago, I felt as if I'd been transported to another world.

"Here we are," Holmes said, stopping in front of a shop called Iyuki.

It was a traditional wooden townhouse with a simple but elegant exterior. Its humble signage made no attempt to stand out. If you weren't paying close attention, you'd miss it.

Now, at this point, I was accustomed to Kyoto, so I immediately knew what kind of place it was. It was a teahouse with geisha entertainment—something I thought I'd never have a reason to visit.

"H-Here?" I asked nervously.

"Yes," Holmes said, opening the sliding door without hesitation.

"Welcome," a waitress in a kimono with a soft smile greeted us.

"My name is Yagashira."

"Mr. Kitashiro has already arrived."

"Oh, has he?"

"This way, please."

Kitashiro was the name of Daimaru Kyoto's manager. He was already there, so we went upstairs to the second floor, feeling sorry about being late. As the shopfront suggested, the building was very old, but the stairs and floors were polished, giving it a dignified air similar to that of a shrine or temple.

The waitress led us to a Japanese-style room near the stairs. The moment we entered, Holmes bowed and said, "We're sorry to keep you waiting."

"It's been a while," I said nervously. "Thank you for inviting us here today." I bowed deeply.

Sitting at the table were Kitashiro and Taniguchi, who I had met before, and a

man who was unfamiliar to me. They welcomed us with cheerful smiles.

Holmes and I took our seats as prompted.

“Thank you for taking the time to come here, Aoi,” said Kitashiro, the manager. “And congratulations on your engagement.”

I awkwardly bowed again. “Um, thank you.”

Taniguchi from the sales promotion department hurriedly leaned forward and said, “Oh, please don’t be so nervous. We just want to congratulate you two.”

“That’s right,” said the man sitting next to her. “Oh, and nice to meet you. I’m Nakahara,” he introduced himself with a smile.

“I’m Aoi Mashiro,” I replied with a slight bow.

“There’s another reason,” the manager added, grinning. “We wanted to use this celebration as an excuse to get to know Aoi better, since Kiyotaka is crazy about her.”

“Um...” I looked around, flustered.

“Kitashiro, you’ll make her even more nervous by saying that,” Taniguchi interjected.

“That’s right,” Nakahara and Holmes agreed with a laugh. I felt the tension suddenly disappear.

“Well then, a toast to Kiyotaka and Aoi’s engagement, unofficial as it may be. Cheers!”

After the toast, we chatted while enjoying a delicious meal in the quiet atmosphere of the old teahouse.

“Excuse me,” said a maiko, or an apprentice geisha. She entered the room, knelt, and bowed deeply, her hands on the tatami floor. After her came a geiko—a Kyoto geisha—who bowed as well.

“How lovely,” I murmured, fascinated by their graceful movements.

Just having them here made me feel like I was in a different world. The maiko was sweet like a small blossom, while the geiko was beautiful like a large flower. They served us drinks, and everyone recommended that I try the

traditional teahouse games “Konpira Fune Fune” and “Tora Tora.”

Konpira Fune Fune was a hand game played while singing a song:

Konpira fune fune (Konpira boat boat)

Oite ni hokakete (Raise the sail against the tailwind)

Shura shu shu shu (Shura shu shu shu)

Mawareba shikoku wa sanshu (Go around to Sanshu, Shikoku)

Naka no gori (Naka District)

Zozusan (Mount Zozu)

Konpira Daigongen (Konpira Great Gongen)

Ichido mawareba (Go around again)

The song was about Kotohira-gu, a shrine on Mount Zozu in Kagawa Prefecture (formerly called Sanshu) that was nicknamed Konpira because it enshrined Konpira Gongen, a guardian deity of seafaring. During the Edo period, people from all over Japan made pilgrimages there. For the common people, it was the second-most aspired-to pilgrimage after Ise Shrine, and it was said that this song was sung by boat passengers as they sailed there from Edo.

In the game itself, you competed against the maiko or geiko using a small sake cup called a hakama, placed on a stand between the two players. When the hakama was on the stand, you touched it with your palm. When the opponent took it away, you touched the stand with a closed fist instead. It was a simple back-and-forth game, but the players had to take turns to the rhythm of the song, and as the speed increased, things got more and more confusing. On top of that, having a little alcohol in your system made it easy to lose right away, which we all had a good laugh about.

Tora Tora was, to put it simply, a game of rock-paper-scissors that used the whole body. Instead of rock, paper, and scissors, the options were tiger, old woman, and Watonai holding a spear. I was told that Watonai was the name of a soldier who appeared in a story about the Chinese Ming Dynasty. In the game, Watonai won against the tiger, the tiger won against the old woman, and the old woman won against Watonai, who was her own son.

A folding screen was set up in the room and the players waited on either side as the Tora Tora song was played: *Senri hashiru yo na yabu no naka o (In a four-*

thousand-kilometer thicket)

Minasan nozoite gorojimase (Everyone, take a peek and see if you've been fooled)

Kin no hachimaki tasuki (Wearing a golden headband,)

Watonai ga en'yaraya to (Watonai, with great effort,)

Toraeshi kedamono wa (Captures a beast)

Tora to-ra to-ra tora (Tiger tiger tiger tiger)

Tora to-ra to-ra tora (Tiger tiger tiger tiger)

Tora to-ra to-ra tora (Tiger tiger tiger tiger)

The opponents stepped forward in time with the music, and upon doing so, they had to make a pose corresponding to their choice: crawling on all fours for the tiger, pretending to hold a cane for the old woman, or pretending to hold a spear for Watonai.

I stepped forward with the old woman pose and the maiko had the tiger pose, meaning it was my loss.

“Oh no, Aoi got eaten! Avenge her, Kiyotaka!” exclaimed Taniguchi.

“Understood. Leave it to me.”

This time, Holmes chose tiger and the geiko chose Watonai. Everyone had a good laugh at his defeat.

“By the way, some places use Kiyomasa Kato instead of Watonai,” Holmes explained. He had accompanied the owner to teahouses many times, so he seemed accustomed to them.

“Huh? You’ve been to teahouses before, Kiyotaka?” Nakahara asked, surprised.

“Yes, my grandfather brought me to them on several occasions.”

“You really are from a fancy family, huh?” said Taniguchi. “Nakahara and I are new to this, just like Aoi.”

The manager grinned and said, “You can take this opportunity to learn from the professionals of hospitality.”

“Yes.” Taniguchi and Nakahara nodded firmly.

From his words, it felt like in addition to congratulating us, the manager had also wanted to give the sales promotion department members a glimpse of this world. Amidst the geiko and maiko's shamisen music and singing were attentive care and enchantingly beautiful gestures. It was truly hospitality from another dimension.

This is a place where you can forget about the secular world.

"And for Aoi, it's good to experience this kind of world because the Yagashira family is a little unique, isn't it?" the manager added.

His words moved me. "Yes, thank you." I smiled and bowed deeply.

And so went my teahouse foray in the guise of an engagement celebration. It was a very rare and precious experience.

*

"It was truly wonderful," I said passionately as I thought back to that night.

"I know what you mean," Akihito agreed. "The owner took me to the Hanamachi before too. It was like a totally different world. I felt like I was in Ryugu-jo."

I thought of the undersea palace of legend and nodded firmly. "It *was* like Ryugu-jo." There was no better word to describe the hospitality we'd received.

"Yeah." He nodded back. "It's like, the first time I went to a teahouse, I thought, 'You can't get this atmosphere from a bar, no matter how high-class it is.' Being there made me feel special and proud, and I really wanted to be someone who could go there on my own. And when I become even more successful, I wanna be the kind of guy who can bring others there."

The owner smiled fondly. "That's good. The Hanamachi are supported by those kinds of sentiments. I just know you're gonna make it big enough that you can bring youngsters there with you."

"Right!" Akihito clenched his fist.

"You too, Kiyotaka."

"Yes, I do have that in mind, and of course I will when the situation arises. However, to be honest, the only person I sincerely want to bring to various

places for a variety of experiences is Aoi,” Holmes said nonchalantly, sipping his champagne.

The owner narrowed his eyes in mild exasperation. “You’re so hopeless.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t lie to myself.”

“What do you think, Aoi?”

“Oh, um, I think that if I were to achieve great success in something, I’d want to be like you or Kitashiro—someone who can give young people wonderful experiences,” I replied.

The owner’s eyes widened. His reaction made me realize that he’d been asking what I thought about Holmes’s response, and I shrank back in shame. However, his expression quickly relaxed.

“That’s great,” he said. “Kiyotaka, Aoi might end up wearing the pants in the relationship.”

“Yes, I think so too. Actually, she already does,” Holmes replied immediately.

“Th-That’s not...” I stammered as the others burst out laughing.

“You really are hopeless,” the owner said to Holmes, facepalming.

2

After dinner, everyone left the table to chat more freely on the sofas. The owner was talking with Yoshie and Mieko, the manager was talking with Ueda, and Rikyu was having an animated conversation with Akihito.

Come to think of it, where did Holmes go? I looked around the hall and peeked into the kitchen, but I didn’t see him anywhere. *Could he be here?* I wondered, walking out onto the balcony. Still no sign of him.

All of the excitement had made it rather hot in the hall, so the breeze outside was very pleasant. I smiled fondly and looked up at the night sky. The thin crescent moon was stunning, like a silver sword.

“How lovely,” I murmured.

“The moon is very beautiful tonight, Aoi,” came a voice from behind me.

I whirled around, startled. Standing there was Holmes with a big smile on his face.

“The moon is very beautiful tonight.” I blushed and looked down.

Holmes’s eyes widened. “Is something the matter?”

“What? Um, I thought...maybe that was a quote from Soseki Natsume just now.” I mumbled, still unable to make eye contact.

“Huh?” He froze. “You’re aware of that Soseki quote?”

“Oh, yes.”

It was said that once, when Soseki Natsume was teaching English, a student translated the English “I love you” literally to “aishite imasu.” He told them, “Japanese people don’t say that. You should translate it to ‘tsuki ga kirei desu ne’—the moon is beautiful tonight.” In other words, according to him, “the moon is beautiful tonight” was a confession of love.

Holmes looked at me, dumbfounded. “Um, in that case, did you know about it when I said it before?”

“When was that?”

“It was quite some time ago, on the night we went to the Saito house with Rikyu and his father because Ukon wanted to select a successor. I said it...after the spat with Ensho.”

I thought back to that day. “Oh,” I murmured.

I had a feeling the moon had been similar that night. Touched by the Saito family’s loyalty, I had decided to stop lying to myself about my feelings for Holmes. And I clearly remembered him admiring the moon and saying, “The moon is very beautiful tonight.”

“Right, you did say it. That brings back memories.”

“What did you think about it back then?”

“Huh?” I froze. “The moon *was* beautiful, so I assumed you were commenting on that fact.”

“I see.” He hung his head, a bitter smile on his face.

“Were you quoting Soseki Natsume?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “You didn’t have much of a reaction, so I thought you didn’t know about the story.”

Back then, he was quoting Soseki when he said those words? I’m happy, but I’m still skeptical.

“You knew and you still ignored it? You really are cruel without realizing it, Aoi.”

“That’s not true! Even if I knew about the quote, I wouldn’t have thought you meant it that way.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re always saying things like that! ‘The flowers are beautiful,’ ‘the stars are beautiful,’ ‘this vase is beautiful’!”

His mouth curved into an understanding smile. “That may be the case, but you’re still unconsciously cruel. That’s the Aoi I know.”

“You’re worse, Holmes. Why did you have to say it in such an unclear way?”

“Forgive me. I was a coward back then...” He touched my cheek.

“I agree with her, Holmes,” said Akihito, suddenly appearing on the balcony.

We quickly separated ourselves and turned around to face the eavesdropper.

“What do you want?” Holmes asked, giving the man a cold glance.

“Why the hell would you say ‘the moon is beautiful tonight’ instead of ‘I love you’? It’s way too unclear. That metaphor sucks.” Akihito folded his hands behind his head and gazed at the moon.

“You wouldn’t understand the sentiment.”

“Who needs sentiment? What, so if I say, ‘I want to go to that moon,’ is that like a dirty invitation?”

“You are so hopeless,” Holmes said, facepalming. The gesture was so similar to the owner’s earlier that I couldn’t help but laugh. Like grandfather, like grandson.

“Oh, that’s right.” Akihito turned to me. “You should prepare yourself, Aoi.”

“For what?”

“Holmes is finally on summer vacation, isn’t he? He hasn’t been able to see you much, so he’s basically about to explode from Aoi withdrawal. I’m sure it’ll be hard for you, but try to be understanding. Right, Holmes?” He turned around and flinched the moment he set eyes on the other man.

“Akihito, shall we have a little chat over there?” Holmes asked with a broad smile, placing a hand on the actor’s shoulder.

“Oh, uh, I’ll pass. I’ve held you guys up long enough.”

“Not at all. Oh, your shoulder is awfully stiff. Did you know that there’s a pressure point here? It hurts a little, but it works great.” He gripped Akihito’s shoulder tightly.

“Gaaaaah!” Akihito screamed before escaping back into the house.

“How hard did you press?” I asked, startled.

Holmes shrugged. “It was an actual pressure point for stiff shoulders. He just overreacted.”

I giggled. “He’s always like that. But he didn’t mean it, you know?”

Holmes looked away weakly. “That bright smile of yours bothers me.”

“Huh?”

“You never know. I could’ve done that to him because he was right.” He glanced sideways at me.

I choked on my words.

“Aoi. Not right now, but...”

“Yes?” I looked up at him.

“I’d like to go to that moon,” he whispered in my ear. My face instantly felt hot.

It was a beautiful moonlit night, much like that other night.

Chapter 3: Close but Not the Same

1

The sound of pen on paper echoed through the quiet interior of the antique store Kura. The manager was sitting at the end of the counter, writing his manuscript as usual. He was working on a new story, of which the first chapter had been published in a magazine just the other day. It was based on *The Tale of Genji* and focused on Hikaru Genji, the tale's protagonist, and Lady Murasaki, another major character. The manager's story was told from Lady Murasaki's point of view.

The manager had written a short story about *The Tale of Genji* for the magazine before, which must have been very well received because they'd asked him to write about it again. However, he hadn't seemed enthusiastic at first. He'd hit a block, saying, "I like Lady Murasaki very much, but I can't empathize with Lord Hikaru. I struggle to understand why such a wonderful woman would continue to love that man." But after scraping together the first chapter for the serial, his writing speed increased as if a switch had been flipped in his mind. His concentration was a sight to behold. The scratching of pen on paper melded with the jazz background music, and I listened to both as I cleaned.

Holmes came out from the back of the store, pushing a cart with a wooden box on it. He placed the box on the table in the reception area and looked at me. "Aoi, we still have some time left, so could you come here?"

"Okay," I said, immediately knowing it was going to be a study session.

"I was hoping you'd take a look at these," he said, removing several pieces of porcelain from the box. They were all bottles. One of them was Kakiemon ware from Arita, and the other four were Kakiemon-style works, adding up to five in total.

"This one is Meissen, right?" I asked, looking at the bottle that was similar to

the one Ensho had brought the other day.

“Yes.” Holmes nodded. “And these are the Kakiemon-style works from France’s Chantilly and England’s Chelsea and Worcester,” he explained, speaking as if he were introducing close friends.

I brought my face close to them and compared the Kakiemon bottle with the imitations.

After a while, Holmes asked, “What do you think?”

“The original Kakiemon is hard porcelain with a milky-white base, and it’s painted asymmetrically. What stands out to me is that there is a lot of blank space in the painted parts, and the birds and flowers strike a delicate balance.” As I spoke, I took out my notebook and wrote down my impressions so that I wouldn’t forget.

“Colors: reddish brown, sky blue, teal, yellow, black, purple.”

“Chantilly’s is opaque and smooth,” I continued. “The painted parts are thin, long, and flat, with black outlines.”

“Yes, I think that’s the major way to distinguish it from other makers.”

“Chelsea’s is painted in a Japanese style, but it uses a unique turquoise color. Worcester’s feels more similar to Meissen’s Kakiemon style than the original.”

“Yes.” Holmes nodded firmly. “Worcester seems to have taken its inspiration from Meissen. I’m impressed you were able to sense that.”

“Really?” I brightened up at his praise.

“Aoi has learned so much in the blink of an eye,” said the manager, putting his pen down and turning around with a chuckle. Apparently, he’d reached a stopping point.

“No, I still have a long way to go.”

“That’s not true,” he insisted. He then compared the bottles and groaned. “Sadly, I can’t tell which of these bottles is Japanese Kakiemon and which are foreign.”

“This is the original, and these are Chantilly, Worcester, Chelsea, and

Meissen,” I explained, pointing at them in turn.

“Now that you’ve said so, they do feel different. But if I’d looked at them without knowing anything, I would’ve believed they were all Japanese Kakiemon since they’re all beautiful,” he said quietly, looking at each bottle.

I nodded. “If you’ve never seen foreign Kakiemon-style porcelain before, you might think they were just different types of Kakiemon.”

“I see,” said Holmes. “That might be true. Without the knowledge that Kakiemon-style works were produced overseas, it would be reasonable to think that. No, but even so...” He fell silent and crossed his arms.

I could sense who had appeared in his mind. “Are you thinking about Ensho?”

He gave a slight nod. He probably couldn’t comprehend why Ensho had been unable to distinguish between Kakiemon and Meissen. Personally, I believed that Ensho was much more lacking in experience than Holmes thought. Holmes had once told me that if you wanted to become an appraiser, you needed to gain as much exposure to antiques as possible. You need to look at a lot of works of art, gain knowledge from them, and use that experience to hone your senses. Ensho had a good eye, and he probably had what it took, but he was severely lacking in experience.

Actually, perhaps it would be better to say his experience was biased, since it was concentrated on paintings. That was likely why Yanagihara was making him run errands. However, gaining experience wasn’t that easy, and Ensho was probably frustrated by his own shortcomings.

But there’s one thing I can say for sure: if Ensho had seen these porcelain bottles beforehand, he wouldn’t have called that Meissen bottle Arita ware.

Holmes seemed to have been thinking the same thing. “Perhaps it wasn’t only Aoi I wanted to show these to,” he murmured softly, reverting to his Kyoto accent.

His words came as a surprise to me because I thought he found Ensho obnoxious. Well, perhaps he did, but this meant he still wanted the man to learn and succeed.

“Hm? What are you talking about?” the manager asked, bemused.

“It’s nothing.” Holmes shook his head and quickly changed the topic. “By the way, how is the manuscript going?”

“You sound like my editor.” The manager laughed. “It’s been going well lately.”

“Yes, you looked like you were in the zone.”

I agreed with Holmes. Usually, after writing a certain amount, the manager would say, “I’m stuck,” and leave as if he were suffocating in the store. But now, he was amazingly focused. Sometimes it was even scary how he worked so single-mindedly on his manuscript, like a man possessed.

“No, it’s nothing like that...” he replied.

It almost looked like he was trying to escape from reality, and I was worried. I’d even asked Holmes about it the other day.

*

“Is the manager okay? He seems out of sorts. Maybe something painful happened and he’s throwing himself into his work as a distraction.”

Holmes tilted his head. “Are you sure? To me, it seems like something happened that motivated him to write.”

Even though we both sensed that something had happened to the manager, our interpretations were completely different.

“He’s like the *Mona Lisa’s* smile,” I said with a sigh.

“That’s a good way to put it.” Holmes laughed.

The *Mona Lisa’s* smile gave different people different impressions. Some people saw it as a gentle smile, while others felt that it expressed sadness. There was no correct answer; it was left to the viewer’s interpretation.

*

Remembering that conversation, I looked at the manager again. He was throwing away the eraser shavings that had accumulated and tapping the sheets of paper on the counter to align them.

He said he couldn’t understand Lord Hikaru, but has he changed since then?

I couldn't bring myself to ask.

"Oh, Aoi, shouldn't you get going?" asked Holmes, looking at the grandfather clock. "Didn't you have plans with Kaori today?"

I snapped out of my thoughts and looked up. "You're right."

Kaori and I were going to have tea at 2 p.m., so I had told Holmes that I would be leaving the store before then. Right now, it was 1:50, so I could still make it in time. I hurriedly went to the kitchenette, took off my apron, and picked up my purse.

I bowed as I headed out. "Sorry, I'll be leaving early."

Holmes and the manager both shook their heads and said, "It's fine."

"We're always depending on you too much, Aoi," said the manager.

"Yes, please enjoy yourself," added Holmes.

"Thank you," I said, placing my hand on the door. "Well then, please excuse me."

I quickly left the store and headed north on Teramachi Street.

2

The door chime rang as Aoi hurried out. After watching her retreating figure from the window, Kiyotaka turned his attention back to the store interior. The manager had also been watching her leave, so their eyes happened to meet. While the manager awkwardly averted his gaze, Kiyotaka stared intently at his father.

"Is there something on my face?" the manager asked, touching his cheek.

"No." Kiyotaka shook his head.

"What's the matter, then?" The manager smiled weakly in response to his son's brazen staring.

After a pause, Kiyotaka asked, "Did something happen recently?"

The manager froze.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” Kiyotaka quickly added.

“Well...” The manager chuckled and sighed. “It was a hot summer, but it’s cooled down quite a bit.”

Kiyotaka nodded silently. The manager looked at the framed flyer on display behind the counter. It was for “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”—a play that Akihito had performed in. The owner had put it up because he liked the young actor.

The manager smiled fondly. “I truly felt like I was having a midsummer night’s dream.”

*

Kaori Miyashita got off the subway at Kyoto Shiyakusho-mae Station with a spring in her step and walked through the Zest Oike underground shopping street to Exit 9, where she climbed the stairs and turned north onto Fuyamachi Street. She took her phone out of her pocket and reread the message from Aoi.

“The cafe is on the first floor of Hotel Resol Trinity at Oike and Fuyamachi. Go north on Fuyamachi Street and it’ll be on the right. I think you’ll see it right away.”

“Will it really be that easy to spot?” she wondered aloud.

Her doubt only lasted a second. Less than three minutes after coming up to surface level, she arrived at her destination: “BLUE BOOKS cafe KYOTO.”

“There it is,” she said, relieved.

She entered the cafe and checked the time. It was 1:30 p.m. Since it was past lunchtime, she was able to be seated without a reservation. Having arrived half an hour early, she ordered an iced coffee and took out her phone to text Aoi.

“I got here a lot earlier than expected, so I went inside first. Don’t worry, though. Take your time.”

She looked around. This cafe was operated by Blue Note Japan, a jazz club from New York. She’d always had the impression that places that played jazz music were dimly lit, so she was surprised by how bright it was. But despite that, it had a very relaxing atmosphere. Since it was a book cafe, there were

bookshelves along the wall. There were also books for sale. It seemed that they had live performances occasionally as well.

A gray-haired elderly couple finished their lunch and spoke cheerfully as they left.

“This place is lovely at night too.”

“Let’s come here at night next time, then.”

What a nice couple, Kaori thought as she watched them. She looked around the cafe again. *It does seem like the atmosphere here would completely change at night. How stylish.*

She took a literary magazine out of her bag. On the cover, it said, “New Serial: *Murasaki’s Love Letter* by Takeshi Ijuin.” That was the pen name of Takeshi Yagashira, the manager. *Murasaki’s Love Letter* was his new story, which focused on Lady Murasaki, a character from *The Tale of Genji*. Lady Murasaki was a lonely young noble, high in status but treated as a black sheep for reasons beyond her control. Hikaru Genji found her when she was little and took her in so that he could raise her into his ideal woman. The first installment of *Murasaki’s Love Letter* ended with the young Murasaki meeting Lord Hikaru.

Since Kaori was loosely familiar with the plot of *The Tale of Genji*, she was able to read the story with ease. It felt fresh reading the events from Murasaki’s point of view, and even though she knew what would happen next, she eagerly awaited the next installment.

After this, Lady Murasaki would grow up to become Lord Hikaru’s most beloved wife. However, she would not be the only one he loved. He would have trysts with many other women, one after another. Lady Murasaki would act in an understanding manner, but on the inside, she suffered every time.

However, since it was still early in this story, Murasaki didn’t show a hint of that pain. The manager always depicted women’s feelings very realistically. Those who didn’t know him might’ve mistakenly thought he was a woman.

Will he portray Lady Murasaki as a woman who was always enduring or will he portray her as someone completely different?

Kaori was looking forward to the manager’s rendition of Lady Murasaki. At

the same time, she remembered what he had said before: “A woman is only happy when she’s number one in the heart of the man she loves, and a man is only happy when he’s united with his number one woman.” Perhaps that applied to *The Tale of Genji* too. Lord Hikaru could never forget his unrequited first love, Lady Fujitsubo, and he roamed in search of her shadow. Ironically, he didn’t realize that Lady Murasaki was the only one for him until after her death. If only he had realized it sooner, he would’ve treasured her instead of having so many affairs. No matter how much he grieved and suffered after her death, it was too late for her.

A woman is only happy when she’s loved the most. I understand what the manager was saying.

“Kaori,” called a voice from nearby.

Kaori looked up and saw Aoi waving with a smile.

“Sorry, I barely made it in time,” Aoi said, sitting down at the other side of the table. Her cheeks were flushed and she was short of breath.

“Wait, did you run here?” Kaori giggled and put the magazine away.

“I left the store about ten minutes ago.” Aoi caught her breath and ordered an iced coffee.

“I said to take your time.”

“Yeah, but still.” Aoi gave an embarrassed laugh. “Anyway, isn’t this place nice?” she asked with a hint of pride.

“Yeah, it really is. Is this one of Holmes’s favorites?”

“Not just his, but the manager’s too.”

Kaori’s heart skipped a beat at the mention of the manager, but she didn’t let it show on her face. “Oh, really? This does seem like a place he’d like. They even play jazz music.”

“Yeah, the manager really likes the Blue Note jazz club. He was sad that the one in Osaka closed down. He and Holmes were really happy when they opened a cafe in Kyoto.”

“Oh yeah?” Kaori replied, acting like she had no idea even though she already

knew the manager liked Blue Note. In fact, now that she thought about it, he might have mentioned this cafe opening.

She looked around again. Unlike Kura, the jazz music here was loud. It really felt like a cafe for enjoying music. It wasn't loud enough to impede conversation, but you couldn't hear much of what people at other tables were saying. It could be the perfect place to confess the truth.

She glanced at her friend, who was adding milk to the iced coffee that had arrived.

"I can drink hot coffee black, but I want milk when it's cold," Aoi said.

"Oh, I know what you mean. Hot and cold are different." Kaori nodded, took a sip through her straw, and exhaled. "Hey, Aoi, do you remember that weird question I asked you at the end of Golden Week?"

Aoi's eyes widened. "What weird question?"

"When I said, 'A woman should be with the person who will love her the most,' or something like that."

"Oh, yes." Aoi nodded. "I remember."

"Good; that makes this easier," Kaori whispered, looking down at her drink.

*

Three months ago, I had asked Aoi a weird question. Golden Week had just ended, and it had been about two weeks since the manager had unknowingly broken my heart. Aoi and I were arranging flowers in the clubroom.

"So, how did the trip with Holmes go?" I asked.

Aoi's cheeks reddened slightly. "It was, um, really fun," she said awkwardly, looking down.

Seeing her blush all the way to her ears was making me feel embarrassed too, so I didn't press further. More importantly, with my broken heart, I didn't want to hear about someone else's successful love life if I didn't have to. I thought touching the flowers might soothe my soul, but instead, I just sighed. The room was quiet since only the two of us were there, so the sigh was very audible.

Aoi stopped what she was doing and looked at me with concerned eyes. “You seem kind of sad these days, Kaori. Did something happen?”

From her tone, I could tell that she’d secretly been worried about me for a while but hadn’t been able to bring herself to ask. She was probably waiting for me to talk about it first. Maybe she felt bad because I never said anything. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust her—if my crush hadn’t been Holmes’s father, I would’ve told her about it long ago.

I slowly turned to her and began. “There’s something I want to ask you.” Even though no one else was in the room, my voice came out as barely more than a whisper.

She nodded with a serious look in her eyes.

“I heard that a woman is only happy when she’s number one in the heart of the man she’s with. So instead of being with the person she loves the most, it’d be better to be with the person who loves *her* the most. What do you think?”

Aoi looked bewildered, as if she hadn’t been expecting that question. “Huh? Well, I’d rather be with the person I love the most.”

I was a little surprised by how readily she answered. For a moment, I was awed that she could say that without hesitation.

“Oh,” I said, regaining my composure. “Well, in your case, you *are* number one in the heart of the person you love the most.” *That’s the best situation to be in*, I thought, my heart burning with envy. “There’s nothing wrong with your mutual feelings, but just as an example, what if there was someone else Holmes loved more? What would you do?” It was a cruel question. I regretted asking it.

A bitter expression came to her face as she tried to imagine it realistically. “If Holmes loved someone else, I’d have no choice but to back down because it’s out of my control. I want to be with the person I love the most, but I wouldn’t want to get in the way of their mutual feelings,” she murmured with a distant look in her eyes.

I internally chastised myself for asking such a question just because I was a bit jealous. “Then what if the person he loved passed away a long time ago?”

“Huh?” She blinked.

“What if he was still in love with a deceased lover?” I continued.

Her expression immediately turned grim. She might have realized my situation from those words. Well, she probably wouldn’t think it was the manager I was in love with.

“In that case...I might end up prioritizing my own feelings,” she replied.

“Prioritizing?”

“Yeah. Even if the person I like continues to love that deceased woman the most, I’d want to be by his side. I think it’d be painful, but still...” She took a deep breath and looked at me. “I stand by what I said. I’d want to be with the person I love the most, even if I’m not their number one.”

Her words pierced my heart. *I feel exactly the same way. I still want to be with the person I love the most, even if he can’t reciprocate.*

I made up my mind right there. *I’m going to confess.*

*

Kaori took a deep breath and continued, “You might’ve realized it by now, but I fell in love with someone who never stopped loving his late wife, and I had my heart broken.”

Aoi nodded silently in response to the bold confession. Her face was serious yet sorrowful. It moved Kaori to know that her friend was truly concerned about her.

“Well, I say that, but it was only indirectly,” Kaori added.

“Indirectly?”

“He said not to fall in love with him, in, like, a roundabout way. I didn’t know if he was aware of my feelings, though.” In fact, she still didn’t know. Had the manager noticed how she felt?

Aoi nodded, seeming to understand the circumstances of Kaori’s heartache.

“So I was going to give up, but then you said that if it were you, you’d still want to be with the person you loved the most, even if they loved someone else more, and I really agreed with that. I hadn’t confessed properly, so I

decided to give it a real go, once and for all. If it didn't work out, then I'd give up."

Aoi gulped and leaned forward slightly. "When did you do it?"

"In June. It was raining really hard that day." *The complete opposite of today*, Kaori thought, turning to the window and lowering her gaze because of the blinding sunlight.

3

"It was raining cats and dogs that day in June," the manager began with a faraway look in his eyes. His hands were wrapped around a coffee cup in his lap. "I was in the store by myself, sitting at the counter and absentmindedly watching people pass by. Since the shopping street is roofed, their umbrellas were folded." He gazed fondly out the window the way he had that day.

Kiyotaka, who was behind the counter, said nothing as he listened.

"Then, a girl—no, a woman—I knew came into the store, soaking wet. I hurried to bring her a towel, but right before I gave it to her, I noticed she was crying..."

"What happened? Are you all right?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"I see. For now, you should dry off—"

As soon as I placed the towel on her head, she jumped into my chest and said, "I love you. I know you're still in love with your late wife, but I love you nonetheless. I want to be with you."

The manager's eyes and the tip of his nose reddened at the vivid memory. He looked down.

"How did you react?" Kiyotaka asked.

The manager wiped his nose with a handkerchief and smiled weakly. "I was

moved, and we started dating. I'm ashamed to admit that she was even younger than you are." He lowered his eyes in guilt, but Kiyotaka made no remark. "When we walked around, we looked like father and daughter. I call it dating, but we only did cute things like having tea together, going out for meals, and occasionally seeing a movie. I enjoyed that time very much," he continued nostalgically, sipping his coffee.

*

"And, like, I was really happy in that relationship. We went to cafes, restaurants, museums, the movie theater... I felt safe and relaxed when I was with him. I wanted to be with him forever," Kaori murmured, wrapping her hands around the glass cup. The ice inside made a clinking sound as it melted. "But then I...did something terrible." Tears welled up in her eyes.

"Huh?" Aoi frowned. "What did you do?" she asked, breaking her silence.

Kaori looked down, her hands trembling. "We went to Maruyama Park. It was really empty that day for some reason." She took out a handkerchief and pressed it to her nose.

*

"At the end of July, we went to Maruyama Park. It happened to be a cool evening, so it was the perfect weather for a walk. Perhaps because it had been very hot during the day, the park was completely empty. It was as if we had the whole place to ourselves. We spoke happily about the rare sight as we walked, and at some point, we sat down on a bench."

Kiyotaka nodded in silence.

"As we gazed at the evening sky, the temple bell rang out. It was a familiar sound, but it felt very new in that moment. I said, 'Kyoto really does have a unique atmosphere,' and we looked at each other and smiled. That was when I noticed a small leaf in her hair. I didn't know what it was at first, though, so I brought my face closer to see. Suddenly, she made a tense face, pushed me away with all her might, and said, 'Stop! I didn't think you were that kind of person!'"

*

Kaori was on the verge of tears, so the two girls left the cafe and went to Hakusan Shrine, which was right next door. As soon as they entered the tiny shrine grounds, Kaori began to cry as if the dam holding back everything she'd been enduring had burst.

"I...realized at that moment," she said. "I loved him, but I hadn't really seen him as the opposite sex. I just admired him and wanted him to spoil me like my uncle did. By saying that, I made him realize it too. I did a terrible thing and hurt him, even though I really did love him." She sobbed.

"Kaori..."

"And even so, he was nice to me until the very end when we broke up. I really am a horrible person."

Aoi gently hugged her friend. "I'm sure he understands everything."

"Everything?"

"He knows that you genuinely admired him and that you feel guilty about hurting him."

Kaori said nothing.

"And I think he's in pain too, knowing that you're suffering like this."

Kaori looked up, bewildered. She hadn't said anything about the person's identity, and yet Aoi spoke as if she knew how he would feel. *Did she sense who it was?* Kaori's heart pounded. Part of her had accepted the possibility that Aoi would figure out it was the manager, but at the same time, she still didn't want her to know.

"How do you know? I mean, what makes you think that?" Kaori asked with bated breath. Her voice trembled slightly.

"Well, of course I'd know."

"Huh?"

"He's a wonderful person who you truly love and respect, isn't he?" Aoi said with a tearful smile.

"Aoi..."

Large tears spilled from Kaori's eyes again. Her vague feelings finally felt clear. She genuinely admired and respected the manager. She wanted to learn something at his side, and she had mistaken that feeling for love.

"E-Even if he understands, I still feel really bad." She looked down.

Aoi nodded and gently patted her back. "Yeah...but I don't think there's anything you could've done about it."

"Huh?" Kaori slowly moved away and looked at her friend's face.

"No matter how love ends, it always leaves scars," Aoi said softly with a sad expression on her face.

Aoi is who she is today because of those scars, Kaori thought. She leaped into Aoi's chest and cried, her sobs echoing through the empty shrine.

As Aoi hugged her best friend, she remembered something Kiyotaka had said in the past. "You know, Kaori, this shrine is really small, but it's the head shrine of over two thousand that worship Mount Haku. This one is known as a great doctor because she cured the toothache of the last empress in history."

Kaori looked at her in confusion, as if wondering why she would bring that up.

"So I'm sure she'll heal the pain in your heart too. She'll help you," Aoi said, completely serious.

Kaori burst out laughing, tears still in her eyes.

"Oh, sorry for saying something weird out of nowhere," Aoi said, flustered. "It just came to me."

"It's fine. Thanks." Kaori smiled. "I didn't know about the doctor thing, but my mom told me that Hakusan Shrine's deity is Kukurihime, a goddess of marriage who brings people together." She shifted her gaze to the shrine. "I'm really thankful that I was able to meet a great friend like you." She smiled softly.

"Kaori..."

This time, it was Aoi who was moved to tears.

"Hey, don't cry," Kaori said, panicking.

"S-Sorry."

They looked at each other and giggled.

“We must’ve surprised Kukurihime, suddenly showing up here just to cry our eyes out,” said Kaori. “We’d better apologize and give thanks. Let’s go and pray.”

“Yeah.”

Kaori and Aoi wiped each other’s tears, stood in front of the shrine, clapped their hands, and bowed.

4

“She didn’t realize that she was in love with the idea of love, and she didn’t see me as the opposite sex,” the manager said with a chuckle, resting his chin on his hands.

“But you were aware from the start, weren’t you?”

“Of course.”

“You always were sensitive to the inner workings of the heart.”

The manager made a conflicted face and shrugged.

“But spending time with her while knowing that means...” Kiyotaka raised an eyebrow.

The manager averted his gaze in shame. “Yes, you’re right. That’s why I was careful not to make her see me as a man. I tried to keep her from realizing the truth. I knew she would find out eventually, but I wanted to enjoy that time as much as I could. For me, spending time with her was like a delightful dream.”

“But you reached the time limit.”

“Precisely. She’s a very serious person, so she blamed herself for not seeing me as a man and making me aware of that fact. I’m sure she’s still suffering now. I really feel sorry for what I did,” he murmured sadly, staring into space.

“What you did was truly wrong.”

The manager hung his head at Kiyotaka’s harsh words. “Ruthless as ever, I see.”

Kiyotaka took a small breath and glanced down at the counter. He picked up the literary magazine that was there. On the cover, it said “New Serial: *Murasaki’s Love Letter* by Takeshi Ijuin” in bold print.

“I read the first chapter of your new story. It was very good.”

“Thanks.” The manager placed a hand on his head, relieved at the change of topic.

“What you did was immoral, but now that I think about it, you’re better than Lord Hikaru.”

“What do you mean?”

“Faced with an unwitting girl who didn’t consciously see you as the opposite sex, you didn’t forcefully make her yours,” Kiyotaka said, flipping through the pages.

“No,” the manager said firmly, shaking his head. “Lord Hikaru and I are fundamentally different from an emotional standpoint. Lord Hikaru loved Lady Murasaki. His lingering attachment to Lady Fujitsubo was a delusion—Lady Murasaki was his true love. So although his deeds were unforgivable from an outsider’s perspective, I believe that his feelings were very pure. As proof, he was prepared to assume responsibility for her whole life.”

“I see,” Kiyotaka said, closing the magazine. *On the one hand, there’s Lord Hikaru, who acted out of love for the oblivious girl. On the other, there’s my father, who kept his distance from her because he didn’t truly love her but still wanted to be with her.* “Through this relationship, you came to a conclusion regarding your interpretation of Lord Hikaru.”

“Yes.” The manager looked down.

“And that’s why you’ve been making good progress on your manuscript lately.”

The manager turned around and looked at the porcelain bottles. “Yes, it’s given me a new perspective. I’m very grateful to her for showing me such a wonderful dream. That said, she must be suffering, and my heart aches when I think about it.” He sighed.

“Indeed.” Kiyotaka nodded and looked out the window. “But I’m sure she has a great friend who will heal her broken heart,” he whispered.

The manager’s eyes widened in shock. “What...makes you think that?” he asked stiffly.

Kiyotaka smiled softly and said, “She was a wonderful person who you wanted to be with, wasn’t she? That kind of person is surrounded by great people.”

The manager nodded in relief and sipped his coffee.

Their time together looked very similar to love, but it was merely an imitation, thought Kiyotaka. *Some people might still call that “love,” but in their case, it wasn’t. It was close but not the same.*

“It’s like Kakiemon and the foreign imitations, isn’t it?” Though it wasn’t love, it was wistful yet beautiful, and they had both learned a valuable lesson from it. Kiyotaka stared at the cover of the magazine in his hands and murmured, “This story is sure to be a masterpiece.”

Short Story: The Melancholy of Seiji Yagashira

It was early May; specifically, the day Kiyotaka and Aoi were returning from their trip. The Yagashira residence was bustling with activity as everyone got ready to surprise Kiyotaka. Akihito had even taken Ensho to the unsuspecting man's room. Rikyu, however, remained seated at the bay window in the living room, looking unenthusiastic.

Seiji Yagashira walked up to the bored-looking boy and asked, "You're not joining in?"

Rikyu shrugged. "I don't want to go too far and make Kiyo hate me."

"You're just depressed because he finally went on a trip with Aoi, aren't you?" Seiji asked mischievously.

The boy put on a strained smile. "Well, I don't like it, but I've half given up."

"Oh, you've finally accepted their relationship?"

"I haven't accepted Aoi, but I accepted their relationship a long time ago."

"Eh? Whaddya mean by that?" Seiji folded his arms and tilted his head.

"I still think there's someone better for Kiyo. But remember when they broke up? When I saw how careless he became after that, I realized he might need Aoi after all. Ever since then, I've accepted their relationship," Rikyu said with a displeased sigh.

"Oh yeah, that was a real pain. Ugh, he was so damn depressing. Remembering it gives me goosebumps." Seiji rubbed his arms.

"Goosebumps? What was he like from your perspective?" Rikyu leaned forward, curious.

"Well..." Seiji put his hands on his hips and looked up at the ceiling.

*

"Aoi won't be coming to the store anymore," Kiyotaka suddenly announced

upon returning home that day. His face was pale and lifeless.

I was gonna ask him what happened, but he looked so weak and on edge that I couldn't bring myself to say anything.

"Sorry, I'm retiring to my room for the night, so please take care of your own meals," he said before slipping out of the living room.

I watched his listless form leave and then glanced at Takeshi. "What was that?"

"Something must've happened with Aoi," my son said with a strained smile.

"Well, yeah."

It was plain as day. *Ah, young relationships are always rife with trouble. They must've gotten into a fight over something silly.*

I didn't worry too much that day. My grandson was a capable guy, so he'd make up with her soon enough. That was all I thought at the time.

But the nightmare went on. Kiyotaka stayed gloomy and depressed. Not only did he stop cooking, he stopped eating entirely. Then, he suddenly started researching. Something strange was going on.

"Good evening," he said, quietly appearing one day. He looked like a ghost. Creepy, despite being my own grandson. The usual Kiyotaka kept his hair, face, and clothes neat, even at home, but right now, his hair was messy and he had light stubble.

"Huh, so you *are* capable of growing facial hair. I had no idea." I laughed heartily in an attempt to shake off the gloomy mood.

"Could you refrain from speaking so loudly? It rings in my head," he muttered, taking a bottle of mineral water from the fridge and quietly drinking from it.

Ugh, this is so grim. Should I sprinkle salt on him?

"Seriously, what happened with you and Aoi?" I asked.

He had his back to me, but I saw his shoulders twitch. "It's nothing. Please don't worry about it," he replied expressionlessly before retreating back to his room. He had the eyes of a dead fish.

Now it's clear. Basically, he was dumped. Speaking of which, he was dumped a few years ago too, by a girl named Izumi. Maybe he's surprisingly prone to it?

Last time, he was definitely depressed, but he refused to show it, making every effort to appear calm and composed. But this time, it's different. What was that? He must've really been suffering to look like that. And why did Aoi dump him in the first place? She seemed head over heels for him.

Well, there's only one reason Kiyotaka would be so depressed: self-hatred. In other words, the natural conclusion is that he was dumped as a result of his own foolishness. Which means...he must've cheated on her. Since Aoi was still in high school, he had to go to another woman to spend his pent-up urges, and Aoi found out about it.

Before his previous girlfriend dumped him, he'd been a "pure young lad" through and through. But after that, he played around and became accustomed to sex. He probably called up one of the women from back then to scratch the itch. To him, it might've just been a one-night stand with no meaning behind it, but to a pure young lady, it was an unforgivable betrayal. Good grief. I did warn him not to lay a hand on Aoi, but he went too far with the acting. If he was gonna hold back to the point of cheating, getting caught, and being dumped, he should've made up his mind sooner.

But seriously, how long is this gloomy attitude gonna last? He hasn't been eating right and he's been researching in his room like a madman. The house is so dismal; I can't stand it. Why won't he go out with his friends or something to distract himself?

Just as I sighed, Akihito Kajiwara appeared on the TV screen.

"Oh, that's right! Akihito!"

I quickly took out my phone. *He'll be able to fix this.*

"Hello, Akihito? It's me. Could you come pay Kiyotaka a visit? It seems like Aoi dumped him, and we can't take the depressing mood anymore."

But by the time I called, Kiyotaka had already left for Hyogo. Still, after that, he somehow managed to get Aoi to forgive him. *He really is hopeless without her.*

“Kiyotaka, don’t ever let your cheating come to light,” I said to my grandson, who had regained his energy after reconciling with Aoi. “A man needs to be able to keep secrets.”

“What on earth are you talking about? I’m not cheating.” He frowned, displeased.

Looks like he went through a lot. I bet he regrets losing someone important to him just because of a onetime blunder. And Aoi’s really something to be able to make him reflect so much on his mistake.

“Yep, you’ve got Aoi. Cherish her,” I said quietly.

“I will.” He nodded with a happy smile.

*

“It went something like that,” said Seiji, recounting those days. “Just awful.” He shrugged.

“Um, you know Kiyo didn’t end up like that because he was cheating, right?” asked Rikyu.

“Yeah, I found out what really happened later.”

“Oh, so you did find out the truth.”

“That I did. But at the time, I was convinced it was cheating. Ha ha ha!”

“It’s just like you to think that,” Rikyu said with a fond smile. “But personally, I liked him more when he was cold and calculating enough to cheat. I wish he’d go back to the way he was before he met Aoi.” He gazed out the window, resting his chin on his hands.

“Is that really how you feel?”

Rikyu fell silent.

“Well, I’ll agree it’s annoying how lovey-dovey he gets when he’s around her. Makes me feel like I’m gonna be sick. But still, he seems really happy. It’s a little creepy, but I’m glad to see him like that.”

Rikyu pouted and muttered, “I mean, I *do* want Kiyo to be happy. That’s why I haven’t been bothering them lately.”

Seiji's expression relaxed into a smile.

At that moment, Akihito returned to the living room. "I got Ensho set up in Holmes's room!" he announced.

"Ohhh!" the others exclaimed.

Rikyu sighed, shrugged, and looked out the window again. "Oh, a taxi stopped in front of the house. It's probably Kiyo." He turned around, eyes sparkling.

"Oh!" Everyone's faces lit up.

Upon Kiyotaka's return, the festivities began...but that story was covered in the previous volume.

Chapter 4: Ensho's Soliloquy

1

It was the end of April when I met someone I hadn't seen in a very long time.

"I'm glad you seem to be doing well, Shinya."

I'd been called "Ensho" for so long that it felt weirdly ticklish to be called by my real name. I shrugged, not knowing what kind of face to make.

The attractive young man smiling in front of me was my childhood friend, Yuki. The word "delicate" described him to a T. He'd always been pale and frail, giving off an androgynous impression, and now he also had the mature aura of a grown adult.

Y'know, the first time I saw Holmes, he kind of reminded me of Yuki. I thought about what had happened later at Nanzen-ji Temple, when Holmes had swung his folding fan down at my head. *They're completely different, though.* I chuckled lightly.

"But even though you said you'd visit more often, you haven't come to see me at all," Yuki complained, eating the dim sum with mild resentment in his eyes.

I had visited him after washing my hands of the counterfeit business, getting Yanagihara to take me under his wing, turning myself in, and sorting out some other things. Thinking about it, I hadn't seen him again since then. This was only my second time meeting him after becoming an honest citizen.

"I'm in training, so I haven't been able to. More importantly, how's work going?" I asked, changing the subject.

Yuki's face clouded over. "It's all right."

"What's that mean?"

"It's tough. The design company is a bit on the exploitative side." He heaved a

sigh and rested his chin on his hand.

“You graduated from university and got a good job, so keep at it.”

“I know.”

“So, still no girlfriend?”

“No...” He grimaced, looking like he was about to cry.

I knew he saw me as more than a childhood friend or older brother figure. And, well, maybe it wasn't his fault. In a way, I'd brainwashed him when I'd decided, “Even if I never walk in the light again, I want to be someone's hero—just one person's is fine.” I'd forced my ego on him and made him dependent on me, but now, here I was, trying to wake him up. *Damned selfish, that's what I am*, I thought with a strained smile.

“Hurry up and get hitched to someone nice; I wanna see your kid's face,” I said, pretending not to notice his feelings.

For a second, he looked extremely hurt. “Oh, Shinya. You sound like my dad,” he replied, his smile quickly returning.

Yuki had been raised by a neglectful mother. Because of the harsh environment, he'd developed a habit of unconsciously smiling even when he was in pain. It was hard for me to see him like that. It was like he was smiling to convince himself that he wasn't hurt. How many times had I told him in the past, “You don't gotta force yourself to smile in front of me”? But now, I was forcing him to put on that fake smile.

“Well, I pretty much am your dad,” I replied.

“Eh, you're more like an older brother than a dad.”

“Uh-huh, you're my precious little brother.”

“Yeah...” He nodded, his eyes and the tip of his nose tinged with red. Since I'd been protecting him for so long, seeing his face like that made my heart ache.

“What about you, Shinya? Don't you have a girlfriend?”

“Nah. Being tied to a specific woman is a pain.”

“I see you haven't changed in that sense.” He looked somewhat relieved.

Not wanting to get his hopes up, I continued, “But there’s one that caught my attention recently.”

“Huh?” He blinked, seeming genuinely surprised. Fair enough, considering I’d never expressed interest in a woman in front of him before. “W-Wow. What’s she like?”

“Hmm, well, she’s a university student.” I rested my chin on my hands and grinned.

Yuki laughed as if he thought I was joking. “A university student, huh? That’s even more surprising.”

“That it is.”

“Is she cute?”

“Eh. She’s not especially a looker, but, well...she’s all right.” My expression relaxed as I pictured Aoi in my head.

“You seem kind of serious about her.”

“Huh?”

“You made a really soft face when you talked about her. And the fact that she’s not especially pretty also makes it sound like you’re serious,” he explained before muttering, “I see.” Then he made a resigned face and said, “I hope it works out for you.”

He hopes it’ll work out, huh?

“Yeah,” I murmured, downing the Shaoxing wine in a single gulp.

There’s no way it’ll work out. Soon, she’s gonna belong to another man in both body and soul. I could compete with an average guy, but I don’t stand a chance against him. Not that I mind. He found her first. I couldn’t see her appeal right away, and at that point, I’d already lost.

Just like Yuki, I forced a smile to hide the smoldering feeling within me.

2

After eating, we parted ways and I walked around Kobe’s Chinatown for the

first time in a while. It was crowded, brightly colored, and chaotic, just the way I remembered it. The town I grew up in was an extreme mix of rich and poor, classy and crass, beautiful and ugly. I was once at the very bottom of all that.

Long ago, I'd taken a forgery I'd painted to a mansion in Ashiya, pretending it was the real thing. My fake work of art had been displayed with care in the reception room of that old, castle-like, Western-style estate. I remembered the indescribable feeling of superiority and excitement I'd felt like it was yesterday. But now, I realized it'd all just been a selfish desire for revenge. While I'd been starving in poverty, there were people living in mansions up on the hills, eating delicious food every day without a care in the world. I'd wanted revenge against them.

Revenge? What was I thinking? I thought, sneering as I gazed at the streets. *I was just taking out my frustration on them even though they hadn't done anything to me.*

My forgeries had reached a point where no one could detect them anymore, and the underworld worshipped me as a god. For a while, I had the wrong idea and thought I could be proud of my artistic skill. But I could never step into the public eye. It was agonizing at times, but I kept going, telling myself that all my crimes were for the sake of supporting Yuki. Maybe that was why when Yuki graduated from university and got a job, the wind was suddenly taken out of my sails. I really did want to run up to him and say, "You made it off the bottom rung; good for you!" But when he asked where I'd gotten the money to support him, I couldn't answer. Knowing he'd been living off dirty money would torment him. He had a respectable path in front of him, so I wanted him to forget about me and live an honest life. Meanwhile, I wanted to become someone entirely different. Becoming a monk was probably a way of deluding myself. Maybe I thought that by doing so, I'd be forgiven for all of my past sins.

3

The Buddhist name I was given was "Ensho."

"It means 'peaceful life,' because that's what you'll have from now on," said the head priest, smiling gently.

A chill ran down my spine. He wasn't the head priest of a famous temple for nothing.

And so, my life among the monks began. Pretending to be something I wasn't was my specialty, so I liked to think I played the role pretty well. And indeed, I could feel myself mellowing out with each passing day. But it was still only an act. As I lived in peace and quiet, continuing to pretend to be a monk, something began building up within me, bit by bit. My hidden true self began to scream, but I turned a blind eye. I figured he'd give up eventually. All I had to do was wear the mask and live a quiet life. I was trying to kill my true self.

That was when I heard the news from one of my former colleagues. "We've got trouble," he said. "Someone saw through your forgery."

I had total confidence in my work, so his words truly surprised me. "Seriously? Who was it?" I asked.

"Seiji Yagashira—"

A famous appraiser. Well, every world's got its experts.

"Not bad," I said, honestly impressed.

"No, it was credited to him, but the one who actually identified it was his grandson and apprentice, a university student named Kiyotaka Yagashira."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

As it turned out, Seiji Yagashira and his grandson, Kiyotaka, had visited a museum for an inspection. Seiji had immediately sat down on the sofa and commanded, "Kiyotaka, go take a look at everything first. Lemme know if you find anything suspicious." The grandson had done as he was told, discovered my forgery, and reported it to Seiji.

A university kid had seen through my work. It was hard to describe my feelings at the time. They were a complicated mess of disbelief, frustration on the verge of anger, and—of all things—joy.

I had to know what kind of a guy he was, so I went to the antique shop Kura in Teramachi-Sanjo, where I was able to see him from outside. At first glance, he seemed like a nice guy—the kind who'd never even killed a bug before. He had

pale skin, a sense of cleanliness, and an attractive face.

“What? He’s a cute young’un like Yuki?” I was honestly disappointed. He was clearly a rich kid, and I felt incredibly annoyed. “I lost to *that*? You’ve gotta be kidding me,” I muttered, turning on my heel and seething with frustration as I walked down Teramachi Street. “All right, I’ll test him, then.” My inner self, who I’d been suppressing, broke free as if a dam had burst. Unable to stop those feelings, I set up a trap at Nanzen-ji Temple while the head priest was away and made arrangements for someone to call for the young appraiser.

And so, I faced off against Kiyotaka “Holmes” Yagashira. After identifying me and seeing through all of my traps, he took a folding fan out of his pocket and swung it down at my head. *It was shocking; that’s for sure! Hah!*

That well-mannered young’un who looked like he’d never killed a bug in his life instantly transformed before my eyes, putting on an awfully dark smile. I caught the fan and grinned at him, but in reality, I was terrified, thinking, “What the hell is this guy?” At the same time, a shiver ran through my body at the realization that he and I were of the same breed. I shoved him away, stole his fan, and ran off, laughing all the way. I didn’t know why I was laughing. Thinking about it now, I was probably overjoyed that someone had discovered me. Someone had dragged me out of the shadows and thrust me onto the stage. I was startled, confused, and most of all, absolutely ecstatic.

*

That’s how it started. I sighed.

I began challenging that man with my counterfeits, not knowing whether I wanted him to see through them or not. Thinking back, there wasn’t anything to it. I must’ve wanted him to see through everything. I wanted to be found. It was frustrating every time he exposed my tricks, but at the same time, I felt proud of him for some reason.

When I found out he was interested in the plain high school girl who worked part-time at his shop, I was frankly disappointed. Sure, everyone has different tastes, but this was clearly someone who just happened to be nearby. Her face was nothing special, and it wasn’t like she had an exceptional figure.

Why would he go for someone like that? Did she confess to him in tears, and

he couldn't refuse? No, that's giving him too much credit. Maybe he decided to give it a try and it turned out better than expected. Still, he can do better than that, I thought as I observed Aoi Mashiro. She was far too commonplace for the only man in this world who'd earned my acknowledgment. It even felt like she was a stain on something important to me.

My impression of her changed a bit on the night of the Yagashira family's New Year's Eve party. I brought my own authenticity game to play, and things got heated. Holmes and I were childishly grabbing each other's collars when she ran between us, shouting, "S-Stop! We're in the middle of a party. Cut it out, both of you!" That was a real surprise. When she barged in, I'd assumed she was gonna cover for Holmes and tell me not to hurt him. But instead, she scolded both of us, not just me.

It reminded me of my elementary school days, when I was always the only one who took the blame when a fight broke out. There was one classmate who had made fun of my family for being poor and threw a rock at me. I immediately shoved him, and even though our teacher had been right there, watching the whole thing, I was made out to be the bad guy while the honor student got off scot-free. At the time, I wasn't really outraged. I essentially just gave up and accepted my fate.

But Aoi was different. Even though she had feelings for Holmes, she didn't take his side. It was probably the first time in my life that I'd been judged fairly. I couldn't help but smile when I remembered it. The look on Holmes's face when she scolded him was golden too. I burst out laughing at the sight of him being overpowered by a high school girl. I no longer wondered why he would go for her. I genuinely started to think she was a pretty nice girl.

4

My opinion of Aoi improved again the day I invited her to the park to mess with Holmes. We sat on a bench, and I handed her a wooden box. Inside was counterfeit Joseon white porcelain, cruelly broken in half.

Aoi looked at it and frowned. "This is..."

"I don't need it anymore, so I broke it," I said, pretending it was the genuine

piece I'd previously brought to Kura.

She looked down at the broken incense container. Then she looked at me and declared, "No, this isn't the white porcelain you brought in."

I asked how she knew.

"It's obvious at a glance. This isn't the same white porcelain." There wasn't a hint of doubt in her eyes.

Now, that was a surprise. I was impressed. For a second, I forgot to breathe. "A connoisseur's girlfriend's got sharp eyes too, eh? Not bad for a high school girl. That's a forgery I bought in China."

It was a lie. I'd forged it myself. In other words, Holmes's woman had seen through my work. It was a pretty convincing piece in my opinion, but I'd set it aside since it wasn't good enough to challenge Holmes with. I'd broken it to mess with Aoi, figuring that a normal person wouldn't be able to see through it. But she did—and she was only a high school girl. I trembled, and at the same time, I was struck by a realization: this girl's eyes could see something's true nature. Tangible or intangible, her mind's eye could see through to the truth. That was why that man had chosen her. To me, who'd always thought of women as accessories, this was a shocking revelation that overturned my entire value system.

"Hey, did Mr. Holmes fall in love with your keen eyes?"

She immediately blushed and looked down. "N-No, I don't think it was that."

"Why'd you pick him, anyway? Isn't he a real weirdo? Is it because he's rich, educated, and good-looking?" I asked, forcing a smile to hide my inner turmoil.

I know Holmes didn't choose you because of your looks or on a whim. But what about you? You have a good eye, but you're still a giddy teenager. You're probably just attracted to that surface-level stuff.

"N-No, that's not it either..." She shook her head, bewildered. "It's because we can show each other our weaknesses and embarrassing sides." She took a breath and her expression relaxed. "I love all of his weaknesses, his competitive and childish sides, his quirks, and his slight eccentricities."

Her eyes were gentle and accepting. In fact, for a moment, I even felt like I was being accepted. But I immediately realized it was an illusion and smiled bitterly.

Ahh, I think I get it now. She doesn't just have a keen eye; she's ridiculously tolerant. I almost forgot she was a high school girl. I facepalmed. *Even though my first impression of her was a total kid.*

I looked at her and noticed her legs were tightly pressed together and there was tension in her shoulders. She was constantly emitting an aura of wariness, even when she was relaxed.

"Hey, you're still a virgin, right?" I asked with a chuckle.

She choked and looked away, blushing all the way to her ears.

I laughed at the cute reaction. "That egotistical guy must care about you a whole lot if he's keeping his hands off you."

I meant it. *He really does care about her.* Suddenly, I felt a burning sensation in my chest. Words couldn't describe my jealousy. Not only was I jealous of Holmes, but I was frustrated with myself for taking this long to see what was so good about this girl. I had the sudden urge to destroy everything.

I grabbed her chin and peered into her face. Her eyes widened in fear.

"I wonder what face he'll make if I defile you."

*

It sure ended up being a dangerous stunt. Holmes found us and came running to hit me, and I put Aoi in front of myself as a shield.

I did it because I was confident that he'd stop just in time, but thinking about it now, I went too far. I facepalmed as I reflected on the past.

Apparently, Holmes was wary of me after that and broke up with Aoi. He decided that distancing himself would be safer for her. Then, they separately unraveled my past, resolved the complicated mess between themselves, and got back together.

When I heard about it all from Yanagihara, I thought, *Well, I'll be. I really caused them a lot of trouble. I wish them happiness.*

But not too long after that, I heard that Holmes had left for training. I wanted to see Aoi's face, so I paid Kura a visit. In the short time I hadn't seen her, she'd become a university student.

She looked at the piece I brought in and said admiringly, "I think it's the work of Yu Fujiwara."

I was astonished to see how she'd grown as an appraiser. *I guess this is what happens when you're always being coached by a guy like Holmes.* I envied her environment.

She denied it, saying that she'd done a lot of research on her own, but there was no way Holmes's influence didn't have a huge impact. She looked just like the guy when she appraised the tea bowl. The entranced, slightly excited expression on her face and the way she talked about the piece were exactly like him. But unlike Holmes, she had a healing effect. I felt myself mellowing out when I was with her, like all of the malice was leaving me.

I was impressed by how much she'd grown, but it confused me that she still had the aura of a little girl. I could tell that Holmes hadn't laid a hand on her yet. Why was he still stalling their relationship? Annoyed for some reason, I went to rile him up.

I don't know why I did that. I guess I still lose my cool in front of him. And I guess the same goes for him.

*

That's how they were, but apparently they're going on a trip next month for Aoi's birthday. That little girl is finally gonna become an adult.

I smiled a bit as I imagined her turning bright red and flustered in front of Holmes. The next moment, a nasty feeling took over my chest. Feeling helpless, I took my phone out of my pocket and called one of the women I used to play around with a lot. There were several who'd be willing to share a bed with me with just one phone call.

"Hey, do you still have straight black hair?" I asked.

The woman I was calling was similar in stature to Aoi and had the same hairstyle as her. I was trying to use another woman to replace her. I couldn't figure out if I wanted Aoi, if I was only a little interested in her, or if my frustration was amplified because she was Holmes's woman. I'd never fallen in love before, so I didn't really understand.

If this is love, how twisted does that make me? I thought with a self-deprecating laugh.

6

The next morning, I was sweeping Yanagihara's garden as usual. Using the bamboo broom, I swept only the fallen leaves and not the gravel underneath. I'd done a lifetime's worth of it back when I was a monk, so I was accustomed to the task.

"Morning, Ensho." Standing on the veranda with a smile was my teacher, Shigetoshi Yanagihara.

"Good morning, sir."

"The peonies have bloomed beautifully," he said, putting on his sandals and stepping out into the garden where the patch of bright pink flowers was.

Yanagihara's Japanese-style house in Arashiyama was one big work of art, both the building itself and the garden. I'd heard he designed the garden all by himself instead of getting someone else to do it.

I guess people who live in the art world have a different sense for this stuff, I thought as I watched the sophisticated old man admire the peonies.

"Ensho, how was last night's flower?" he asked, grinning in amusement.

"Huh?"

"You met with a woman, didn't you? You came back in the morning, so I thought you might not have slept."

I'd returned from Kobe early in the morning on my motorbike, but I'd turned off the engine outside the property to avoid making noise. I'd thought I'd returned to my room quietly.

“Sorry if I woke you,” I said.

“No, you didn’t. Even if I were awake, I wouldn’t hear you quietly going to your room. I just got that impression from looking at your face.”

I smiled awkwardly. *Skilled tradesmen really do become monsters when they grow old.* “Sorry, I know I’m in the middle of training...”

“This isn’t a temple. Enjoying flowers falls under training too. Touching flowers enriches the heart.” Yanagihara looked down at the peonies and chuckled.

His words made me feel guilty. Last night had cleared up my urges, but it definitely hadn’t enriched my heart. If anything, it made me feel even emptier.

“You really are like Kiyotaka,” he continued.

“Huh?”

“He was like that before he met his current girlfriend.”

“I...see.” *He did his share of wandering too, huh?* It was a strange feeling.

“And he seems happy now. Oh yes, did you hear that they’re going on a trip?”

“Yes.”

“He spent a great deal of money to take her on the 7 Stars. Now then, I think it’s time for breakfast.” He laughed merrily as he went back inside the house.

I stared at him, dumbfounded. *It’s Holmes, so I expected him to plan a luxury trip. But the 7 Stars? Really?*

“That’s overkill,” I mumbled out loud without thinking. “How much are you gonna splurge on her?” *I’ve even heard a rich guy in Ashiya say it wasn’t easy to get tickets for that. How did Holmes pull it off? Well, knowing him, he used every trick available.*

“Why the hell are you giving a top-class experience to an unsophisticated girl like Aoi?” I muttered.

That naive girl is gonna change. You’re giving her the best treatment to make yourself seem sincere, when really you’re getting her used to luxury so she won’t be able to leave you. That’s just egoistic. I don’t care if you progress your

relationship with Aoi, but don't turn her into an annoying socialite. I clicked my tongue in frustration and resumed sweeping. *I regret riling him up.*

7

There were currently four people living at Yanagihara's house: Yanagihara and his wife, a hired maid, and me. The secretary, Taguchi, only came by when needed, and Yanagihara's kids had gone into different fields of work.

As an apprentice, I accompanied Yanagihara when he was working, did household chores like a temple servant, and studied antiques during breaks. Since I'd always specialized in art, it wasn't hard. In fact, I even found this lifestyle enjoyable. But part of me couldn't help but be impatient about catching up to Holmes. You can only reach the top of a mountain by climbing one step at a time. I knew that, but I was desperately looking for a shortcut anyway.

Thinking about Holmes and Aoi's trip had made me irritable for the past few days. In an attempt to calm myself down, I got Yanagihara's permission to pick some peonies from the garden and arrange them in an old Imari vase.

"Huh, well done," came an unfamiliar boy's voice. "Are you frustrated right now, though? Your work is oozing with roughness."

I looked up, startled. Lying on the tatami behind me was a pretty boy eating a popsicle. If I recalled correctly, he was the son of the owner's girlfriend. We'd met at Saito's place before.

"Rikyu?" I asked in a low voice.

"You remember me? I'm flattered." He grinned and sat up.

Anyone would remember such a beautiful boy. But why was he here? More importantly, *when* did he get here?

"You were so absorbed in arranging those flowers that you didn't notice me," he said with an amused smile, taking a bite of his cold treat. "It was pretty funny."

“Are you running errands for Yagashira?”

“Nope. I live nearby, so I come over sometimes.” He finished his popsicle and threw the stick at the waste basket. Upon confirming that it had gone in, he clenched his fist and gave a satisfied “Yes!”

“Aren’t you bored here?” The homeowner was taking an afternoon nap and his wife was out shopping.

“Nope, it’s soothing to look at the garden.” Rikyu gazed at the yard through the open sliding door.

“You’re young, but you act like an old man.”

“What? Well, I also got to see something interesting just now.”

“Something interesting?”

“Yeah, your face when you’re burning with jealousy.” Elbows on the table, he rested his chin on his hands and grinned.

I said nothing.

“Oh no, don’t glare at me with that scary face. You and Kiyo really are obsessed with that girl, huh?” He shrugged, seeming displeased.

“You wouldn’t understand,” I said arrogantly.

He pouted. “I do understand. But I think looks are everything, so I just can’t accept it. If she were gorgeous, she’d have my full approval.”

Looks are everything, eh? I used to be like that too.

I chuckled. “You say that ’cause you and your mom are both beautiful.”

“That’s not it.” He crossed his arms. “My mom used to be really unattractive. I only ever saw her as ugly, but since that was normal, I didn’t think anything of it,” he murmured to himself, looking at the garden. “But then she met the owner, and with his advice, she quickly became a real beauty. After that, everyone who’d been rude to her suddenly changed, whether it was the neighbors or the teachers at school. That was when I realized that beauty is power all on its own.”

“I see. Yeah, I get that.”

No matter how you try to sugarcoat it, the world is weak to beauty. Even the most powerful people yield to the beautiful ones.

“I’ve always been watching Kiyo because everything about him is beautiful: his looks, his demeanor, even the way he scolds people who overstep their bounds. He’s perfect in every way, so he’s my idol. I’m as grateful to him as I am to the owner for changing my mom. So when I found out he chose Aoi, I couldn’t accept it at first.”

I understood that too. *I felt the exact same way.*

“But as I watched her, I felt like I could understand why he did it. Honestly, I still don’t completely agree with it, but I just want Kiyo to be happy.”

“Well aren’t you a good little brother?” *They’re kinda like Yuki and me, but a bit different.*

“Hey.” He suddenly directed a sharp gaze at me. “What I mean is, stop trying to have an affair.”

I was surprised by the stark difference in mood. “What did you just say?” I asked in a threatening tone without thinking.

“What’s with that reaction? Are you a thug now? Believe me, I don’t *want* to acknowledge you as Kiyo’s rival. The aunties in the art industry might’ve been fawning over you lately, but in my eyes, you aren’t beautiful at all. Anyway, Kiyo is everything to me, so I won’t let anyone make him sad. He’s found happiness, so don’t get in his way.” He glared at me in contempt without a hint of hesitation, and I felt my blood boil. “Normally, I wouldn’t bother coming here to warn you, but Kiyo was in really bad shape when he broke up with Aoi last time, so I don’t want you to interfere with his love anymore. I’m sure you’re popular enough to have lots of people who can help you with your sexual urges,” he said with an angelic smile.

Before I knew it, I’d stood up and pushed him down. “Will you help me, then? I swing both ways.” It was supposed to be a threat to strike fear into the annoying brat, but I felt myself seething with anger nonetheless.

I expected him to look scared, but instead, he laughed and said, “You really are sleazy. Can’t say I’m a fan.”

He suddenly spun around, grabbed my wrist, and twisted it upwards. The next thing I knew, our positions had switched—now I was the one pressed against the tatami mats.

“Sorry,” he said. “As you may know, I’ve been doing judo ever since I was a kid. I’m actually stronger than Kiyo, so I’m pretty sure I’m better than you too.” He gripped my arm tightly and put on a smile that might’ve been even darker than Holmes’s.

I remembered how he’d thrown Tsukasa at the Saito estate and clicked my tongue. *Right, I forgot about that.*

“What’ll it be?” he asked. “Can I go ahead and dislocate your shoulder? Or are you going to apologize for pushing me down?” He strengthened his grip on my twisted arm while holding me down so that I couldn’t move.

He ain’t just threatening me; he really is strong. “All right, I apologize. Forgive me,” I sighed.

He relaxed and let go. “Yep, I knew it. Someone who’s strong to some extent can tell how strong their opponent is.” He had a sweet smile on his face as if nothing had happened.

“Yeah, but I really didn’t expect you to be a martial artist.”

“I get that a lot.” He grinned. “The owner told me to become strong enough to protect my loved ones. I took up judo because he recommended it.”

“Huh.”

“That’s what he said to me, but apparently he told my mom, ‘He’s so skinny, he’ll die from a cold if we don’t put him through training.’” Rikyu shrugged.

“Die from a cold?”

“Kiyo’s mom passed away from a cold that worsened, so the owner is overly nervous about that kind of thing. He made Kiyo train too.”

“Oh, I heard about that.” *Because of that, the owner had supervised Holmes constantly, not even letting him go to kindergarten.*

“Anyway, I started martial arts because I was told to become strong enough to protect my loved ones, and that includes Kiyo. So I had to become stronger

than him.”

He spoke casually, but it couldn’t have been easy to surpass Holmes. He probably had natural talent, but he must’ve put a lot of effort into it too.

“Do you have special feelings for Holmes?”

“If you mean romantic feelings, no. To me, Kiyo is like... Oh, I know. If this were the Sengoku era, he’d be a lord and I’d be his lifelong servant.” He clasped his hands together, his eyes sparkling.

“He’s your lord? Holmes really is surrounded by weirdos.” I laughed in disgust.

“You’re one of them,” Rikyu retorted nonchalantly. “Back to the point, stop trying to have an affair with Aoi, all right?”

“Hmm, I dunno.”

“What?”

“Why’re you so wary of me?”

“Because you seem like you’d do anything to get what you want.”

With that, I realized he was wary because he thought I’d take Aoi by force. Despite all the things he said about her, he seemed to be worried about her. *What a contrarian*, I thought, laughing.

“I don’t force myself onto women,” I said. I’d threatened Aoi that way before, but I hadn’t been serious.

“That doesn’t sound convincing when you pushed me down a few minutes ago.”

“That was because you’re a man. I don’t need to show restraint with men.”

“I feel like Kiyo says something similar sometimes. Ugh, I found something you have in common.”

“What?” I gave an annoyed smile. “Well, the point is, I ain’t gonna do anything to Aoi. At most, I’d just seduce her.”

“You’d ‘just’ seduce her?”

“Hey now, if she were the kind of woman who’d be swayed by the prospect of

an affair with me, she wouldn't be fit to be 'Kiyo's' girlfriend, would she?"

"Yeah, but..." He pouted, then smirked after a moment. "Well, you're right. I don't think Aoi would fall for your seduction."

There was a challenging gleam in his eyes. Despite what he said, I could tell he wanted to test Aoi to see if she'd be swayed by me.

"That's right, so leave me alone." I moved away from Rikyu, sat down in front of the vase again, and picked up a peony.

The boy gave an exasperated shrug and stood up. "You're too greedy for your own good, Ensho. Why don't you take an easier route?"

His footsteps faded into the distance.

Too greedy for my own good, eh? "It's true," I muttered to myself in the empty room. Even though I made a clean start, I keep trying to go down painful roads. Even when it comes to my first-ever faint feeling of love.

I chuckled and crushed the peony in my hand.

8

On Aoi's birthday, I decided to send her flowers. They were all in shades of red, but I arranged them beautifully so they wouldn't look gaudy. The theme was "hidden love." *What'll she think when she sees these flowers?*

I picked up a pen and jokingly wrote a message saying, "Happy birthday, Aoi. How was your first time with Mr. Holmes? Let's have an affair sometime."

An affair, eh? If I sleep with her, will I be satisfied? Before that, do I really wanna go out with her? I don't know. I frowned. Honestly, I don't think I wanna be in a childish relationship like theirs. Maybe I'm just making up a fantasy in my head and getting excited about it. But even if it's only a fantasy, there's no denying how damn restless my heart is right now.

*

On the day Holmes returned from his trip, I was invited to the Yagashira residence.

Akihito, who was sitting on the living room sofa, clapped his hands together as if he'd just come up with something. "Hey, Ensho, go wait in Holmes's room."

He has the nerve to order me around? I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Now that's a good idea." The owner nodded, clearly amused.

"You can't just barge into Kiyo's room without permission," protested Rikyu, sitting in front of the bay window. He glared at us, upset that we were going to intrude on his lord's personal space.

"It's this way," Akihito said gleefully, quickly getting up and leaving the living room.

"We're really doing this? Well, it does sound fun." I got up and followed him.

Holmes's room, eh? Knowing him, it must be neat and tidy. I chuckled as we walked down the long corridor.

"It's the one at the end of the hall," said Akihito. "It's probably not locked. Oh, yeah, it's open." He opened the door without hesitation and turned on the lights.

I gasped. For a second, I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Figures; it's as messy as ever. He could've at least cleaned up before leaving for his trip."

Like he said, the room was a total mess. Well, the only issues were the giant piles of books on the floor and bed, but those were more than bad enough. Even my room was cleaner.

"Well, do me a favor and wait here. There are a lot of books, so at least you won't be bored, I guess? Turn off the lights when Holmes gets home, all right?" Akihito clapped me on the shoulder and left.

I looked around the room in silence. It was my first time there, and I felt my heart pounding. As I carefully examined my surroundings, I began to think the piles of books were actually very fitting. *Oh, I see. After reading this book, he became curious about this other one, but he also wanted to check this one again, so these three ended up here. Huh, I can actually see his trains of thought. His interest darts around like an electric current.*

There were a lot of sticky notes and hastily written memos. *It's like a student's room*, I thought, impressed. I picked up a book that had been left at his bedside. It was about Arita ware and had a map of Kyushu. *Oh, since they were going on the 7 Stars. The circled spots must be scenic. What a hard worker.* My expression relaxed.

"Hm?" I noticed a thick book on the bed's headboard. I picked it up, assuming it was a dictionary, but it turned out to be a simple planner. Short phrases were written next to the dates. *What an old-fashioned guy, writing his plans in a notebook in this day and age.* I flipped it open. The most recent page said "5/2 — Departure date," marked with a cutesy flower symbol. I burst out laughing. *What is he, a little kid?*

I flipped to the April page, where most of the entries were about museum or art events. Brief notes like "Modern fine art exhibit — previous one was better," "Taikan Yokoyama exhibit — going with Aoi," and "Western modern art exhibit — presentation was good" had been jotted down.

I kept reading. The planner went back three years. On the February page from two years ago, the fifteenth had been circled. It was the day he'd called me to Kura. I flipped to the previous page and discovered the only diary entry in what had otherwise been a book of short memos.

"I broke up with Aoi. I think this is for the better. Being with me would only result in her getting hurt. I wanted to make her despise me. I regret that I couldn't do it properly. It pains my heart that I was incompetent until the very end. I really am useless when it matters most. Our time together was short. Thank you, Aoi. Was I able to do anything for you?"

He'd truly let out his emotions on this page. It was obvious that he'd written this with his heart in a hopeless state.

Ah...Holmes really does love Aoi. I let out a deep sigh at the powerful emotions in his writing. I finally understood why Rikyu had said those things. Holmes really had been in rough shape after breaking up with Aoi. Meanwhile, I was just a third wheel, and even worse, I'd hurt Aoi badly in the past.

I gently put the notebook back, feeling an ache in my chest, and flicked the light switch. The moon seemed very bright. I gazed out the window for a while,

absentminded, until I heard the sound of footsteps in the hallway. Judging from how quiet and elegant they were, it was definitely Holmes.

When I see him, I'll smile and say, "Congrats. How was your trip?"

After a little while, the door gently opened. Holmes took one step into the room and immediately stopped.

Well, of course he'd be able to sense an intruder's presence right away.

As soon as I thought that, Holmes grabbed a nearby wooden sword, charged towards me at the speed of light, and swung it down with great force.

Bang!

An explosive sound rang out the instant I caught the blade with all my strength. *That was a full-power swing—was he seriously trying to kill me?*

His cold eyes, bathed in moonlight, sent a chill down my spine.

My hands stung. *If that had hit me, I would've been seriously injured. No, he must've been sure I would stop it. It was the same for me that time in the park. Aoi and I were sitting on a bench, and I was making a move on her when Holmes swung his fist at me. I grabbed her hand and pulled her in front of me as a shield. It was an unthinkable, terrible act. If Holmes's fist had hit her, it would've been a disaster. But back then, I was sure he'd stop in time. There wasn't any logic behind it; I was just certain it'd be fine.*

I realized that he and I were similar in every way. He was the only opponent with whom I could clash seriously with all my strength, and vice versa. I was suddenly overcome with the urge to laugh, and laugh I did. "Scary as ever, eh? You weren't gonna stop at the last second this time, were you?"

"There's no need to stop for a trespasser." He smiled cheerily.

Unlike before, he had an intense, sensual aura about him. *This guy really did sleep with Aoi.* Confronted with the truth, I felt the unsettling feeling in my chest return. As we exchanged casual words, the air was tense, as if we were locked in a cold war.

"Oh, right. Thank you for going to the trouble of sending flowers to the 7 Stars for my Aoi's birthday. It was a beautiful arrangement. She loved it," he said with

a brilliant smile.

“It sounds so forced when you say ‘my Aoi.’ You don’t need to thank me when you weren’t the least bit happy about it.” I snorted.

He shook his head. “That’s not true. It really was a wonderful arrangement. I was once again impressed by your many talents. The flowers also smelled lovely. Thank you for adding that touch to our sweet moment together.” He held an index finger to his mouth and chuckled.

His words conjured up an image of him on top of Aoi in my head, so clearly that it was as if I’d witnessed it myself. My heart burned with jealousy.

“I’m still indebted to you, Mr. Holmes, so I didn’t really want to interfere with your trip,” I began.

He said nothing, continuing to glare at me.

“But I honestly do like Aoi, so I was thinking of making a real move on her once her trip with you was over.”

That was a lie. *Why would I do that when I don’t even know if I want to date her?*

Holmes seemed unfazed.

“You’re not surprised?” I asked.

“No, I could sense your feelings from that ‘earnest’ arrangement of yours,” he said nonchalantly.

I gave a self-deprecating smile. “Of course you did. Well, what she did with you on your trip doesn’t bother me. I don’t care about a woman’s purity, and considering how sneaky you are, it could be good to let you ‘develop’ her. But still, the 7 Stars?” I grabbed him by the chin.

Rikyu looked ready to jump in at any moment. *There’s a scary kid over there too.* I clicked my tongue. However, it seemed that Holmes purposely hadn’t moved out of the way.

“You really are a nasty man,” I continued. “Do you know what it means to give a clueless child the highest quality things? When they eat the most delicious meat first, they won’t eat cheap meat anymore. That’s how you brainwashed

her. It's like a curse that'll force her to stay with you." *Seriously...don't change Aoi.* I gritted my teeth.

Holmes chuckled, grabbed my wrist, and pulled it away from his face. "I was wondering what you'd say, but that's it? Isn't that how men are to begin with? We use our advantages and resort to whatever dirty tricks it takes to get the woman we want. It's to be expected."

He's right; that's how men are. But what'll happen to Aoi now that he's instilled those luxuries into her at such a young age? He disrupted her life. Can he take responsibility for that?

"You should propose to her, then," I spat out. "Since you liked her enough to brainwash her, you oughta take responsibility by proposing."

He'll definitely make an ashamed face now that proposing's come up. I'll use that to make fun of him—

"I did," he said casually.

Everyone fell silent.

"What? You seriously proposed?" I couldn't believe it.

"Yes, I did." He spoke calmly, but he seemed a little happy and there was a slight blush on his cheeks.

Seriously?

Akihito and Rikyu leaped out while I was still dumbfounded.

"Did you really propose to Aoi, Holmes?!"

"Are you serious, Kiyo?"

"Aoi's still a student! Besides, just think about it! You might meet someone better in the future!"

"He's right, Kiyo! Don't be hasty!"

Holmes grimaced at their desperate pleading. "I'm aware that it isn't possible right now. But there is no better woman for me than Aoi," he said, his face relaxing into a smile.

What an absolute fool. He's so giddy about a temporary feeling of love that he

even proposed. I'm interested in Aoi too, but I'd never think of proposing to her. I mean, I don't even know if I wanna date her. I never expected this guy to be such an idiot.

It was so funny, I laughed out loud. "Ah, I've lost. I've really lost. Aoi was a rare hit with me, but I can't propose to her. You must be getting carried away, eh?" I snickered.

He looked confused. "Carried away? Perish the thought. I'm a connoisseur, and a connoisseur doesn't hesitate when he deems something good and wants to obtain it." There wasn't a hint of hesitation in his eyes.

My heart felt restless again. At times like this, he always made me feel frustrated. *I'm sure he's saying this because he knows that. He really is a nasty guy.*

"Now then, could you all leave the room? I want to change," he said, loosening his tie.

"Yeah, I'm out." I raised a hand and started walking towards the door. Then I stopped and turned around. "But if that proposal wasn't for 'right now,' that means you asked her to marry you 'someday,' right?"

"Yes, and?"

"That's basically the same as kids in a field of flowers promising to marry each other. Aoi might be pretty brainwashed by you, but this means I still have a chance—and time." I grinned and left the room.

It was a desperate last jab from a man who'd already lost. Holmes was prepared to spend his whole life protecting Aoi, and here I was, completely unsure. *Ah, I really am a loser.*

I left the Yagashira residence feeling crushed.

9

After that, I lived like an empty husk, unable to put my heart into my training. I was just going through the motions, the same way I'd done when I lived at the temple.

Having finished tending to Yanagihara's garden, I sat on the veranda and gazed idly at the flowers. The peonies had completely fallen away, and now lilies were blooming in their place. The pure white, dignified flowers reminded me of Aoi.

Did she change after being poisoned by Holmes? I felt like something important to me had been lost forever, and rage towards that man welled up within me. But at the same time, I was fully aware that I was being selfishly jealous.

I sighed.

"Oh, there you are, Ensho. It's been a while, huh?" Rikyu popped up out of nowhere like a rabbit and sat down next to me.

I looked at him without saying anything, wondering what his deal was.

He rummaged in his pocket and took out his phone. "Here, I'll show you something nice."

"What?"

"This."

He showed me his phone screen, which was open to a picture of Aoi at Kura, smiling and wearing an apron. It felt like it'd been a while since I last saw her, but she looked the same as before. The photo was taken pretty well. It felt natural.

"Did you take this?" I asked.

"Yeah, the other day when I went to hang out at the store."

"Well, you made her look pretty cute."

Why did he take a picture of her when he doesn't even like her? Does he enjoy photography? Finding it strange, I looked away from the screen.

"I really doubt you like Aoi as much as you think you do," Rikyu said, folding his arms.

"What did you just say?"

"Can you stop making threatening faces at me all the time? It's scary."

Scary? I don't wanna hear that from you.

"I'm looking at you objectively, without any personal feelings. Imagine this scenario, okay? Kiyo and Aoi are head over heels for each other right now, but let's say something happens between them and they break up."

I said nothing and waited for his next words.

"Kiyo would be depressed for a while, but not forever. His wounds would definitely heal over time, and eventually he'd meet another nice person. Then he'd finally get over Aoi and fall in love with the new person, right? If that happens, will you still be obsessed with Aoi? I want you to think about it seriously."

I didn't know what to say.

"I know you're attracted to Aoi, and I don't think those feelings are a lie...but how do I put this? I feel like what you're most attracted to is 'the Aoi who's loved by Kiyo.'"

His words stunned me.

"It's like how a queen is beautiful because she sits on the throne and has the king's favor. If she comes down from there to where you are, she turns into an ordinary person. When I look at you, Ensho, I feel something similar to that. If Kiyo didn't love Aoi anymore, wouldn't her worth be cut in half for you?"

I couldn't deny any of it. A bitter taste welled up in my mouth.

"And as much as I hate to admit it, you and Kiyo are like opposites, right? Yin and yang, shadow and light. Your counterpart found his soul mate, but you're still alone, and I think that's making you impatient." He looked at the picture of Aoi again. "You know, when I showed Kiyo this picture, he was a real pain."

"A pain?"

"Yeah, he took my phone and grinned at it for ages. And he kept rambling, 'Aoi looks so cute in this. You're so good at taking pictures, Rikyu. I can't get enough of her slightly shy expression.' And then he asked me to send it to him. It made me think, jeez, he really loves Aoi. I don't get the same impression from you, Ensho."

His last sentence hit me like a punch in the head.

“Well, that’s my opinion. I’m not saying it’s all true. I just thought you could use an outsider’s perspective since you seem to be lost.” He smiled.

What’s he thinking? What’s his goal? “Why are you telling me this?”

“Hmm...because it’s amusing.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the unexpected honesty. “Yeah, figures.”

“Also, I sort of felt bad for you. I hate to admit it, but you *are* kind of similar to Kiyo.”

How many times is he gonna say, “I hate to admit it”? I clicked my tongue.

“Hey, why don’t you try meeting with Aoi once while Kiyo’s not around? You’ll be able to confirm your feelings. Now’s the perfect time since Aoi’s working at Kura throughout summer break and Kiyo’s training at Daimaru.”

“Thanks, I’ll do that.”

I didn’t know what this kid was thinking, but I decided to go along with his suggestion for now.

10

A few days later, Yanagihara’s errands brought me to the Kaguraoka area, where the wealthy Yashiros lived. Rich people’s reception rooms all looked the same, and theirs was no exception, with a crystal chandelier, European-style antique sofas, an unused fireplace, and equally unused candelabras.

Mrs. Yashiro, an elderly lady with white hair, was an old friend of Yanagihara’s. She placed a calabash-shaped bottle on the table and said, “I think this is Kakiemon, but I want a proper appraisal from Yanagihara.”

The bottle was beautiful in shape, color, and design. I’d never paid close attention to Kakiemon’s work before, but it was probably the real thing.

“Understood. I’ll bring it to him.” I carefully put the bottle into a box, bowed, and stood up to leave.

“Now, now, at least have a cup of tea before you go. The leaves have steeped

nicely.” She elegantly poured the tea.

“Thanks,” I said, nodding and picking up the delicate Wedgwood cup.

I had thought black tea was just a pretentious drink that always tasted the same, but hers had a very rich fragrance. It was delicious.

“We have a lot of porcelain because my late husband liked collecting it, but I really don’t know much about it. My interests are taking care of flowers and brewing tea. I also love European things. Maybe it’s because my mother was half German, making me a quarter.” She chuckled.

The woman had light brown eyes and sharp features. Combined with her white, almost silver hair and mixed heritage, she looked quite un-Japanese. She had recently turned seventy and was now starting to liquidate her estate while she was still able to.

“I didn’t know until my husband passed away, but there’s an inheritance tax on fine art. I don’t want to cause problems for my children, so there’s a lot I have to think about. Magazines for seniors even have articles on preparing for your own death.”

True, the kids wouldn’t want to suddenly have to pay tax on their parents’ art. But she’s being way too nice if she’s thinking about what’ll happen after she dies. Worrying about inheritance tax is such a first-world problem.

“But I know it’s a fortunate problem to have,” she continued.

I looked at her awkwardly. Perhaps my face had given away my thoughts.

“Ever since I was young, I’ve been told how lucky I am. But I was always like a bird in a cage. I went to the schools my parents decided for me, married the man they chose, and was blessed with children. I was happy, but I never made my own decisions. It’s like I was acting out a character. And I spent my whole life thinking about others—my parents, my husband, my children... Now that my parents and husband are gone and my children have left the nest, I can finally think about myself, but I’m already so old. At this point, I can only think about what will happen after I die,” she murmured with a shrug. “Sorry. I don’t get the opportunity to talk to young people like you, so I couldn’t help but ramble.” She smiled cheerfully.

"It's fine," I said, shaking my head with a smile.

Our circumstances were very different, but our thoughts were the same. I'd also lived my life only thinking of others, and I also felt like I'd been acting out a character the whole time.

Mrs. Yashiro suddenly fell silent and stared at my face.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Hey, are you the Holmes of Kyoto?" She tilted her head.

I coughed. "No, I'm not. That's the young lad from Kura, an antique store in Teramachi-Sanjo."

"Oh, the one from Seiji's place."

"Right. He's Seiji Yagashira's grandson, Kiyotaka."

"I see. I heard there was a handsome young man with a keen eye called the 'Holmes of Kyoto,' and that he was the apprentice of a famous appraiser. I thought it might be you since you have a very manly face." She giggled.

"Thanks." I laughed.

"So he's Seiji's grandson. I haven't seen Seiji since my husband's funeral years ago. I guess he didn't care enough to stay in touch," she said with a shrug.

"Yeah." I laughed.

"If you were Holmes, I would've asked you to look at something, but you're not." She sounded a little disappointed.

I looked up. "I know him. Should I ask him to come?" *He's training at that department store right now, but I'm sure he'll gladly come after work if it's an appraisal request.*

"Oh, it's fine. A long time ago, we had an appraiser who specializes in paintings look at it, and he said it wasn't particularly valuable. I just wanted to hear your opinion if you happened to be the Holmes of Kyoto, that's all. It's not worth calling him over. Thank you, though." She smiled apologetically. She really did seem disappointed.

I found myself curious about the item. "May I have a look at it if you don't

mind?”

“Huh?”

“If I think it has potential, I’ll tell Kiyotaka Yagashira.”

“Oh my...” She placed a hand on her cheek and pondered the idea. “Yes, since you’re already here, I suppose you can.” She slowly stood up and opened a door in the corner of the reception room. “It’s here. This is where I keep my treasures.”

It was a small room, about four tatami mats in size, with an antique white plaster chest and desk. There were several paintings on the walls, all by the same artist.

“They’re by Grandma Moses. Do you know her?”

I nodded. “Yes, I do.”

I may have been lacking in knowledge about antiques, but I did know a good amount about paintings. “Grandma Moses” was the nickname of Anna Mary Robertson Moses. I’d seen her work before, but I hadn’t forged it nor been interested in it.

The paintings depicted gentle rural landscapes and the people who lived there. They weren’t exceptional by any means, and there were places where the rough sketches showed through.

“I love Grandma Moses’s work,” she said. “When I look at these paintings, I feel her warmth and kindness, and it soothes me.”

I nodded silently and looked at the paintings again. Each one was overflowing with sentiments towards the seasons and love for the animals and people working on the farms. Like Mrs. Yashiro said, they were very soft and warm, like what you’d see in a picture book.

The artist’s personality shows, huh? I crossed my arms. *Since I was confident in my painting skill, I used to wonder why works like these were highly regarded and kept for posterity. After all, mine were better. But I don’t think that anymore. Sometimes a painting’s worth can’t be measured by technical skill alone. There are those that radiate an aura even if they aren’t that good. It*

could be “surging passion” or “comforting kindness.” In other words, the creator’s soul is contained in the work. Those kinds of paintings don’t need technical skill or logic to capture people’s hearts. I guess the unfortunate thing is that a lot of the time, it doesn’t happen ’til after the painter dies. Actually, maybe it’s because they died that their attachment to the work is heightened, giving it more power.

“So, was it these Grandma Moses paintings you wanted to have appraised?”

“Oh, no. It’s the small one over here.”

Mrs. Yashiro turned her attention to a painting the size of a postcard above the desk. It depicted two girls with wings, standing back-to-back and looking down. Their faces seemed Northern European. Their wings, crossed with each other’s, looked like hands being raised towards the heavens, but their actual hands were hanging down behind their backs, clasped with one another’s.

“My mother told me that this painting of angels is very important and I must never relinquish it. She also said I need to give it to my children before I die.”

“What makes it so important?”

“I asked the same thing, but she didn’t know either. Apparently she was repeating what my grandmother told her.”

As I listened to her story, I stared closely at the painting, my nose almost touching it. “Yeah, like the other appraisers told you, I don’t think it’s worth that much,” I said, stepping back.

“I see.” She sighed, dejected.

“But there’s something strange about it. It has weird bumps.”

“Bumps?”

“Do you mind if I touch it?”

“I was actually instructed not to let anyone do that.”

“So the other appraisers didn’t either? They only looked at it on the wall?” I looked at her, surprised.

“I took the frame off the wall and had them look at it while I held onto it.”

Would they be able to do a proper appraisal like that? Or did they not even bother since it didn't seem valuable at a glance?

"That'll be fine," I said. "Could you take the painting out of the frame?"

"What?"

"I won't touch it myself."

"Um, okay..."

She hesitantly removed the painting from the frame and blinked in surprise. It was probably the first time she'd done so. "Oh my. There are angels on the back as well. These two are a boy and a girl..." The composition was the same as the front. "And this doesn't seem like paper," she remarked curiously.

I stared at the second painting and then looked at it from the side. "This is copper."

"Copper?"

"It's a copper relief. The angels seem to be painted on top to hide what was carved into it. Sorry, but could I borrow a pen and paper?"

"Yes, I have them right here." Mrs. Yashiro took a pen and notebook from the desk drawer and handed them to me. "But what are you going to do with them?"

"I obviously can't scrape off the painting, so I'm going to draw what was carved into the copper plate based on the bumps."

"What...?" she murmured.

I stared at the angel painting in her hands and began to draw.

"My, you're an amazing artist!" she exclaimed, impressed. But as she watched the picture take form, her face went pale. The carving in the copper plate was a bird with two heads facing left and right. "The double-headed eagle," she said in a raspy voice.

The double-headed eagle was an emblem mainly used by European nations and nobility, such as Germany and Russia. The angels had been painted over it.

A national emblem engraved on a postcard-sized plate that can be carried in

secret, hidden between a total of four young angels. Why was this done?

One theory that came to mind was the tragic imperial family that had been executed in the Russian Revolution. The emperor, empress, and even their children had been killed. *What if the girls and the boy in these paintings were those executed children? Maria, Olga, Tatiana, Anastasia, Alexei... No, there were five siblings in that family, and these paintings only have four.*

I was struck by a startling thought: *What if the one who hadn't been painted was the owner of this copper plate?* I gasped and turned to Mrs. Yashiro, who was still ghastly pale and had a hand over her mouth as if she'd been thinking the same thing. *It can't be.* I chuckled.

Well, let's say the double-headed eagle and the four angels allude to that family, and one of the five siblings was able to escape. We don't know how the undepicted angel was able to survive, but these paintings—small enough to hide in one's clothes—could've been proof of her identity and a ray of hope for the fallen imperial family. It was then passed down through generations until it reached Mrs. Yashiro, without anyone being allowed to touch it. It'd be an awe-inspiring story, but there's no way it's true.

I sighed and stopped thinking about what it could mean. I'd determined that the treasure she'd inherited was a copper plate of a double-headed eagle hidden between paintings of angels. She was aware of that fact now, and that was good enough.

I looked away from the shocked woman and turned my attention back to Grandma Moses's paintings. "I heard Grandma Moses started painting after she lost her husband, when she was over seventy-five," I mumbled to myself.

Mrs. Yashiro looked up, startled out of her daze.

"Then she had her first solo exhibition at the age of eighty," I continued.

"Y-Yes, that's right." She smiled at last. "I know that story too. In 1940, she had her first solo exhibition at an art gallery in New York."

The fact that she'd started in her late seventies must've drawn attention. From there, the news began to cover her and she quickly became a popular artist. But even after attaining fame, she had continued to lead a modest life.

“Seventy-five is older than you are,” I remarked.

“Indeed.”

“There’s nothing wrong with preparing for your death out of consideration for others, but I think you should do what you want. Don’t you like this person’s paintings because they teach you that age doesn’t matter when it comes to starting a life only for yourself?”

Mrs. Yashiro stared at the paintings, her eyes moist with tears. “You might be right. I never realized it myself.” She took a handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed her eyes. “It’s true...you never know when a new life will begin,” she said with a carefree smile.

“That’s right.” I nodded. *Same goes for me*, I thought with a slight grin.

11

Rikyu’s words must’ve gotten to me. On the way back, I found myself standing at the entrance to the Teramachi shopping street. *I need to move on*, I thought, but I couldn’t bring myself to walk away.

Aoi’s probably working at Kura by herself right now. What if she completely changed after going on that trip?

As I stood there, feeling weirdly anxious, two young women called out to me excitedly:

“Um, are you lost by any chance?”

“Do you want us to show you the way?”

“No, I’m fine, thanks,” I said, smiling back at them.

I heard their voices behind me as I walked off:

“He was kind of cool, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

Now that I thought about it, despite my life being a string of misfortunes, I’d never wanted for women. But I’d never felt attached to any of them either. Aoi was the first time I’d ever been afraid to meet someone, and that confused me.

But like Rikyu said, I did have a feeling it was all because she was Holmes's woman.

I'll go see Aoi, and if she's different from before, that's fine. I'll come to my senses and not have to think about this anymore. I nodded and resumed walking.

Upon arriving at Kura, I nervously reached for the doorknob and gulped as I opened the door. The chime rang as usual.

"Whoa!" exclaimed Akihito Kajiwara, who was sitting at the counter.

What, he's here too? I felt a strange mixture of disappointment and relief that it wasn't just Aoi and me.

"Really now? 'Whoa'? That's a harsh reaction, Mr. Actor."

"My bad. You kinda surprised me."

I sat down in one of the chairs.

"Welcome, Ensho." Aoi smiled at me from behind the counter.

This must be what people mean when they say "a smile like a blooming flower." Her smile was so gentle, soft, and bright that it rendered me speechless. She walked with light steps as we made small talk. Her aura was calmer and more graceful than before, giving her a soft sensuality that wasn't dirty in any way. She'd lost her innocence, but it wasn't a disappointment. Even though nothing should've changed about her outer appearance, she seemed remarkably more beautiful than before—like a bud that had bloomed into a flower. I couldn't believe it. I'd been trying to be careful not to accidentally say anything crude like, "How was your first time with Mr. Holmes? A woman really does become prettier after she loses her virginity," but it didn't matter because I was at a total loss for words. I felt nervous, as if I were meeting someone I'd always admired.

As I unconsciously stared at her, she tilted her head and asked, "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing."

"What're you staring at her for? Are you admiring her?" Akihito quipped,

looking at Aoi. “Hmm, well, she does seem prettier than before.”

“Jeez, don’t poke fun at me,” she replied.

“No, I’m serious. You’re definitely a university girl.”

Aoi blushed and looked down. That aspect of her was the same as before. I was afraid she would’ve changed after experiencing such luxury, but apparently my fears were unfounded. She’d blossomed elegantly without losing her naivete.

I was relieved, but at the same time, it made me keep thinking of Holmes. “That guy really pisses me off,” I muttered.

“Huh?”

“Nothing.” I averted my gaze.

After that, I showed them the Kakiemon bottle I’d received from Mrs. Yashiro (which was actually Kakiemon-style Meissen). Then the door chime rang.

“H-Holmes!” Aoi exclaimed.

Standing there was Holmes, who I thought I wouldn’t run into today.

“I see business is booming today,” he said, looking at the counter and smiling cheerfully.

I’ll never forget the look of surprise and joy on Aoi’s face at that moment. She looked absolutely delighted. Not wanting to see that face, I stood up without thinking and said, “The original’s here, so the copycat will take his leave.”

“Copycat?” Holmes tilted his head. “You don’t need to run away just because I’m here.”

“I’m in the middle of an errand.” I quickly put the Meissen bottle away and picked up the cloth-wrapped package. “See ya.”

“Yes, good luck with the rest of your work.”

I nodded and turned the doorknob. Even I was appalled by how awkward that conversation had been. I left the store, running away like Holmes had said.

“What am I doing?” I sighed. My feet felt heavy as I walked up Teramachi

Street.

After a little while, I heard Aoi's voice behind me: "Ensho!"

"What?" I turned around, surprised, but when I saw the hat in her hands, I immediately realized she'd only followed me to return what I'd forgotten. I laughed at myself for getting my hopes up for a second. *What was I expecting?* "Thanks for going to the trouble." I took the hat and put it on.

"Come to think of it, what were you trying to tell me?" she asked.

Oh, right. I shamefully averted my gaze. I was thinking of apologizing to Aoi today. It was definitely too late, but I felt like if I didn't do it, I wouldn't even be allowed to stand at the starting line. The words wouldn't come out, though.

As we stood there, Aoi fidgeted and said, "Umm...let's both do our best, okay?"

What did she just say? I burst out laughing. "What the heck?"

"Um, well, I want to catch up to Holmes someday too, as crazy as it sounds," she said hesitantly, blushing.

She'd always genuinely respected the man as her mentor, but apparently, she now wanted to catch up to him someday. *Maybe it's human nature to want to reach your target.*

"Huh, that's a good goal," I said. "I bet you could become a better appraiser than him."

She pouted as if she thought I were teasing her. I nearly smiled at how cute she was, but laughing would hurt her pride, so I maintained my neutral expression.

"Actually, I hope you surpass him soon. It's probably impossible for me."

Aoi already possessed a good eye and the ability to see the true nature of things, so she had what it took. Meanwhile, it wasn't possible for me, and knowing that made me frustrated.

"Why don't you try painting?" she asked quietly.

I shrugged. "Painting's the thornier path. I know because I saw what my dad

went through.”

How many people have said to me, “Why don’t you become a painter?” It always makes me think, “Don’t just say whatever you want.” I’d seen dozens of painters who couldn’t make a living no matter how skilled they were or how brilliant their paintings were. That said, there were also painters who became popular despite not being skilled. The ones who succeeded had something, but I didn’t know what it was. The world of painting was harsh and incomprehensible. The only reason I was able to live off it before was because I was a counterfeiter. I copied the victorious and fed off of their scraps.

“I don’t mean you should become a painter. You like painting, don’t you? And you haven’t done it for a long time, right?”

I looked away. It felt like she’d read my mind. Then I said, “Yeah. I’ll consider it if you’ll be my model.”

“M-Me?”

“You don’t want to, right?”

“No, that’s not true.”

Her response surprised me. I’d thought for sure she would’ve refused without a second thought. Elated, I said, “It’d be a nude painting.” That was my downfall. *I guess I’m no better than an elementary schooler who says crude things to tease the girl he likes.*

Aoi tilted her head and then immediately blushed and shook her head. “No...no, no, no, no!”

I couldn’t help but laugh at her typical childish reaction. “I’m kidding. I thought you’d gotten a bit sexier, but I guess you’re still a kid.”

“What? Anyone would be flustered if you told them to model for a nude painting,” she grumbled.

As I looked at her and explained that it was a joke, I felt my tension dissipate. Before I knew it, I was speaking honestly at last. “Anyway, what I wanted to do was apologize.”

“Apologize?”

"I know it's late, but I did something really bad to you before, and I've been meaning to apologize for a long time now."

"Oh."

Knowing her, she'll say, "It's all in the past now. Don't worry about it."

"Thank you for apologizing," she said happily.

The unexpected reply threw me off for a second, but I could tell that she was being genuine, and most of all, she'd forgiven me.

"Thanks," I muttered. I remembered what I'd done and looked away in shame. "I really am sorry. You must've been scared."

Aoi shook her head. "It was scary, but..."

Her honesty stung. She must've been really scared, yet here she was, smiling at me. *I did that to this girl...*

"I really don't know what I was thinking, using you as a shield."

My life was full of regrets, but this was one I'd probably continue to regret forever. I bitterly looked down.

"A shield?" She tilted her head as if she didn't know what I was talking about.

"Uh, that time I used you as one." When Holmes had rushed to the park and swung his fist at me without hesitation, I'd grabbed Aoi and put her in front of me, using her as a literal shield.

"Oh, that." She nodded.

Just remembering my idiocy makes my heart ache, but she basically forgot all about it? What the heck?

"What did you think was scary, then?" I asked.

"Well...when we were sitting on the bench and you peered into my face, your eyes were scary. It felt like everything was hitting me at the same time." She shrugged.

My eyes? True, I might've been taking out all of my frustration on her...but using her as a shield was the bigger problem! I exclaimed in my mind.

“So...what about the shield thing?” I asked, baffled.

“You apologized for it just now, so it’s fine. I forgot about it anyway,” she said with a smile.

“How’s it fine? I used you as a shield. Worst-case scenario, Holmes would’ve hit you instead of me.” I felt myself getting worked up.

Aoi held a hand in front of her mouth, amused. “What are you talking about?”

“Huh?”

“You knew Holmes would stop in time, didn’t you?” She looked at me with confident eyes.

For some reason, I trembled. I couldn’t say anything in response.

“I actually did something similar on our trip,” she continued. “I trusted Holmes so much that I accepted a reckless bet. I still regret it.” She sighed.

Still stunned, I didn’t fully process what she said.

“Oh!” She looked up. “I just remembered. Thank you for the birthday flowers.”

I snapped out of my thoughts and laughed awkwardly. “What’d you think when you saw those flowers?” *I put all of my passion into them. How did they look in your all-seeing eyes? Holmes seems to have caught on to my feelings, so you must’ve noticed too.*

“Well...I thought, ‘He’s really trying to get Holmes worked up, huh?’”

Goading Holmes. So that’s how she interpreted it. Well, I guess she’s not completely wrong. I put my hands on my hips.

“Also, that arrangement was like a fire. It looked like the embodiment of your various feelings towards Holmes, and it felt like it was saying, ‘I want to burn out already,’” she murmured with a distant look in her eyes. She must’ve been visualizing that flower arrangement in her mind.

“I want to burn out already,” huh? Yeah, maybe I did want to end it already. Like a flame burning out, I wanted these painful feelings to turn to dust and disappear...

“All right, you win.” I sighed. *She pointed out my true feelings, which I wasn’t even aware of myself.*

Now I knew for sure that I was hopelessly attracted to Aoi. But like Rikyu said, a big part of it was because she was Holmes’s woman. She shone when she was loved by Holmes, dazzlingly.

“Well then, see you, Ensho.” She bowed and went back to Kura with a spring in her step. She must’ve been eager to return to Holmes.

What a pointless love I’ve developed, being attracted to Aoi because she’s Holmes’s woman. I smiled self-deprecatingly. *On the other hand, it fits me perfectly.*

“For now, I think I’ll paint.”

A painting of Aoi training to become an appraiser, that is. I bet Holmes’ll hate it if I brazenly paint her. I don’t care if it bothers him, but I don’t want Aoi to feel uncomfortable because of it. So I’ll hide the truth. Like the double-headed eagle hidden behind the angels, I can paint an Aoi that only I’ll understand...

I thought back on Mrs. Yashiro’s words: “You never know when a new life will begin.” *It’s true.* I smiled and set off again.

Chapter 5: Past Feelings

1

At the antique store Kura, music was playing quietly in the background, as usual. Holmes was checking the account book at the counter, while I was organizing the display window, washcloth in hand.

Time had flown. I'd been rejoicing over Holmes's return to Kura only a short while ago, and today was the last day of August. Starting tomorrow, he'd be at Komatsu's office. Even though I'd been certain that I'd be lonely again, I felt surprisingly fine. Perhaps the short time I'd spent with Holmes at Kura had left me more satisfied than expected.

I hummed a tune as I took down the hanging scroll and carefully rolled it up. Then I heard Holmes give a small sigh.

"I was relieved by how happy you were when I came back," he said.

I turned to face him.

"At the same time, as we worked together, I was worried that you'd be sad on the last day," he continued.

I nodded silently.

"But it doesn't seem that way at all. I thought you were prone to loneliness, but suddenly you seem aloof, as though you don't care that I'm leaving. Sometimes I don't understand you, and it confuses me to no end." He placed a hand on his forehead.

"Th-That's not true. I definitely care. I was actually afraid I'd be lonely too, but I seem to be fine."

"Fine?"

"I think the main reason is that I got to be with you all summer. You taught me about antiques and took me on a lot of dates, so it was really fulfilling. I've

fully recharged, so I'll be able to endure for a while again," I said, clenching both fists.

Over the summer, we'd gone for dinners or seen movies right after our shifts. We'd also asked the manager to watch the store so that we could visit various museums. Just the other day, we'd visited the Kyoto Botanical Gardens and gone for a walk on Kitayama Street to go to Kitayama Kochakan, a teahouse.

This illogical sense of security was probably because spending the summer together had dispelled my fears. When Holmes had left for his training, I'd been worried that my beloved time with him at Kura would be gone forever, but now that he'd come back and we'd spent time together the way we had before, I felt confident that the same would happen after his training ended.

"Plus, your last placement is at Komatsu's office, which is really close by," I added.

"Yes," Holmes said with a slightly cheerful nod.

Komatsu's detective agency was in Kiyamachi-Shijo, which was within walking distance. He also didn't mind if Holmes did appraisal work while he was there. Apparently, he'd said, "There aren't always requests to work on, so you can do whatever you want. Kura's close by, so if there's something you need to do there, just go." Holmes was very pleased with the offer.

But... "I still can't believe you're really becoming a detective." *It's finally time for the "Holmes of Kyoto Gion" to make his debut. Like Akihito said, the job suits him too well.* I smiled and looked at Holmes, only to see that his cheerful expression was now a concerned one as he looked down at the inventory log.

"Is there a problem with that?" I asked. *Did I write something wrong?* I walked up to the counter and peered at the log.

"Oh, sorry," he mumbled, looking up. "The inventory is fine. I was thinking about something else."

"About your new job tomorrow?"

"Yes...well, more or less."

"More or less?"

“I went to see Yanagihara the other day.”

I gave a vague nod, not knowing what Komatsu’s agency had to do with Yanagihara. “Did he call for you?” *Maybe Yanagihara had a request for him.*

“No, I went to ask him for something.”

“You did?” My eyes widened in surprise.

Holmes stopped going through the inventory and looked straight at me. His serious expression made me straighten my back.

What could he have asked Yanagihara for? A certain man came to mind. “Was it about Ensho?” I asked quietly.

“Yes.” He nodded.

I gulped. I didn’t think I’d be right. Does Holmes detest Ensho so much that he asked for him to be expelled as an apprentice? There’s a high chance he said, “I don’t think Ensho is suited to be an appraiser, so please discharge him.” Ensho has been straying off course lately, but it’s not Holmes’s place to say that. If he really did make such a request...I wouldn’t be able to accept it.

“No, um, Aoi, please don’t glare at me with such a scary face. I didn’t ask him to dismiss Ensho,” Holmes said hurriedly, seeming to have read my mind from my expression.

I placed a hand on my chest in relief. “That’s good. I was anxious because I didn’t know what I’d do if you said that.”

“I was the anxious one,” he murmured in his Kyoto accent. “You had a very angry look in your eyes.”

“Huh?” I tilted my head.

“Never mind.” He smiled. “Regarding Ensho, Yanagihara is doing everything he can to give him more experience and develop his mind’s eye. However, it isn’t having the intended effect because Ensho is too impatient, and I think the entire cause of his impatience is me.”

I understood what he was getting at. Ensho might’ve been so conscious of Holmes and catching up that he wasn’t putting enough effort into his training.

“Yanagihara noticed as well,” Holmes continued. “Most of all, Ensho himself seems to be aware of it too...so I asked Yanagihara for a favor.”

“What was it?”

“I said, ‘Please let me take care of Ensho for a while.’”

“Huh?” My squeaky reaction echoed through the store. “You want to mentor Ensho?”

“Yes, and Yanagihara thought the idea had potential too. Starting tomorrow, Ensho will be working with me.”

I gaped at the unbelievable turn of events.

“I can’t keep watching his talent go to waste,” he muttered. “I’d rather not do it, but...”

Those were probably his true feelings. From an emotional standpoint, he definitely didn’t want to support Ensho. But he couldn’t sit still when faced with the man’s rare aptitude.

But still... “I’m surprised,” I murmured.

Holmes shrugged. “I am too. I never would’ve been able to do this in the past.”

I nodded reflexively. Holmes was true to his feelings and egotistical. It would’ve been unthinkable for his past self to help Ensho, who he detested.

“You’ve changed after training at so many places, huh?” I remarked.

“That might be part of it, but...” He placed his hand on mine, which had been resting on the counter, and my heart skipped a beat. “It’s because of you.”

The back of my hand felt hot where he was touching it. “I-I didn’t do anything...”

“I think I’m changing because of you.” He chuckled and rested his chin on his hand. “And I can’t help but take action when I see someone with talent. It was the same back when I asked you if you wanted to work here.”

“Holmes...”

“It feels like you first entered this store just yesterday, and yet it also feels like

it was a very long time ago. It's strange."

"It's the same for me."

Holmes gave a nostalgic smile. "I can remember that day as clearly as if it really were yesterday..."

2

It was a chilly day in March, a month after Rikyu had left to study in France. Just as I was beginning to consider hiring a part-timer to take his place, Aoi visited Kura. My first impression was, "A suspicious high school girl came into the shop." I had noticed her loitering outside. About one hundred and fifty-eight centimeters tall, fifty kilograms in weight, wearing Oki High's school uniform. From her hairstyle and the way she wore her uniform, I could tell she was an earnest student, and the wrinkles in her skirt told me she'd come here by bicycle. Therefore, she lived in the city, probably within biking distance of Oki High.

She looked nervous and was holding a paper bag close to her chest. *Ah, that bag must contain something she wants to have appraised.* I could sense hesitation and confusion from her tightly clenched hands. The item was either something important to her that she didn't want to part with or something she felt guilty about. Based on her suspicious behavior, probably the latter.

For now, let's do something about that guardedness. "Welcome," I said gently with a smile.

She flinched and looked at me, gaping for a second before quickly averting her gaze.

That settles it. She's holding something she feels guilty about.

"Holmes, could you take a look at this for me?" asked Ueda, who'd entered the store right before her. He sat down at the counter and placed a wrapped object on it.

He still switches between my real name and that nickname. "Ueda, could you please stop calling me 'Holmes' already?" I always replied that way when there was a new customer present.

“It suits you.” He laughed, not showing any sense of guilt.

I took my gloves out of my inner pocket, put them on, and unwrapped the cloth to reveal what was clearly an extravagant rectangular wooden box. Inside the box was a thick roll of gold mounting.

I couldn’t help but laugh at the overly fancy presentation. “A gold brocade mounting... It’s very dressy.”

“Right? I thought so too.”

The suspicious high school girl tilted her head curiously as she listened to our conversation. It was a cute sight, like a wild rabbit peeking out from behind a rock.

Mieko, who’d been sitting on the sofa and drinking coffee, stood up and said, “Oh my, a dress?” She leaned over to look and slumped her shoulders as soon as she saw the box. “Ah, you said ‘dressy,’ but it’s a scroll, not a dress. Looks exquisite, though.”

“By ‘dressy,’ I did mean ‘overly exquisite,’ Mieko,” I explained.

“Is there a problem with being overly exquisite?”

“Yes. Just like how a liar smoothly strings his words together, counterfeits usually have overly exquisite mounting and packaging. We call those ‘too dressy’ or ‘inconsistent.’”

The girl was listening intently and even nodding along, probably unconsciously.

“Ahh, I see. It’s like a bluff. Would you say that’s a fake, then?” Mieko asked.

I shook my head before she could jump to conclusions. “That’s what I’ll be determining now. It’s important to not let preconceptions cloud your judgment.”

Sometimes, presumptions can affect one’s appraising eye. “A box this extravagant must contain a fake” or “There’s no way something valuable could be in a place like this.” But right now, I’m more interested in what that earnest-looking high school girl brought in.

I picked up the scroll and slowly unraveled it. “Oh, this is *something* all right.”

Mounted on the gold brocade was a painting of Mount Fuji towering majestically over a cherry blossom tree in the foreground. It was a well-done reproduction that made quite an impact. I noticed the girl gulp upon seeing it.

“It’s great, yeah?” Ueda’s eyes gleamed as he leaned in.

“Taikan Yokoyama’s *Fuji and Sakura*. A lovely work of art.”

“Uh-huh. It’s in good condition too, so it’s gotta be up there, right?”

“My, if it’s Taikan Yokoyama, it must be expensive,” Mieko chimed in.

“A real Taikan piece is in the millions,” said Ueda. “Maybe this one could even be ten?!”

“Ten million?! Congratulations, Ueda!”

“I’m rich!”

I frowned at the excited pair. “Indeed, it’s a beautiful piece, and it’s in great condition...but unfortunately, this is a reproduction.”

Ueda froze and narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “Really? Wouldn’t a Taikan reproduction have the word ‘reproduction’ stamped on it somewhere? I don’t see it anywhere, so it’s gotta be real!”

As he said, Taikan Yokoyama’s reproductions were often marked as such. But that was yet another preconception. There were plenty in circulation that weren’t stamped.

“No, this is most certainly a reproduction.”

Ueda’s shoulders suddenly slumped. It was a familiar sight. He had good business sense, but much to his chagrin, he had no eye for appraisal whatsoever. Whenever he found something he thought could be real, he’d bring it to me only to slump his shoulders after being told it was fake. What I found interesting this time was that the high school girl also slumped her shoulders. Apparently, she had seen potential in the hanging scroll.

“Oh well. I was just thinking I *maybe* struck gold. Well, if you say it’s fake, it’s fake.” He sighed. “Hey, Holmes, what price would you put on this?”

“Hmm... It’s in good condition, so a hundred thousand yen, perhaps? Would

you like to sell it to us?”

The high school girl's eyes widened. She seemed to be surprised that a painting could be worth a hundred thousand even if it wasn't genuine.

“Nah, I'll take it to a more gullible shop.” Ueda quickly began wrapping up the scroll again.

After that, the girl went further inside the store, perhaps feeling awkward about listening to our conversation. She probably found it difficult to speak to me when I was surrounded by our regulars. I needed to throw her a lifeline, so I left the counter and walked towards her. I had intended to call out to her immediately, but I hesitated and closed my mouth. She was looking around with sparkling eyes like a child at a theme park. *Is this her first time in an antique shop?*

The girl stopped in front of the Shino tea bowl displayed in a glass case. She approached it as if drawn to it and stared intently at it. It was one of the Yagashira family's most prized possessions, a national treasure crafted in the Momoyama period. Most people who didn't know about it passed by without a second glance. People typically didn't pay attention to it until they were told it was a Shino tea bowl. I was genuinely surprised that this girl, who likely knew nothing about its importance, would stop to stare at it.

“Do you like it?” I asked softly.

She turned in surprise and immediately blushed. “Ah, um, I don't know. I just thought it was, um, nice,” she replied shakily, her eyes darting around.

She speaks in standard Japanese, not the Kansai dialect, and her intonation indicates that it's natural for her. So she probably grew up in the Kanto area. There aren't any signs of a Kyoto accent either, meaning that she must've moved here somewhat recently. However, the fact that she rode her bike to this inconspicuous antique shop suggests that she's relatively familiar with the city. For a high school student, a natural time to enroll after moving is at the start of the second semester, so she must've come to Kyoto around half a year ago.

But based on her flustered reaction, I must've scared her. “I see. Feel free to take your time looking around,” I said, turning to go back to the counter.

“E-Excuse me!” she exclaimed.

Perhaps she’s finally going to ask me for that appraisal. “Yes?” I turned around.

She opened and closed her mouth a few times before finally saying, “Umm... Why are you called Holmes?”

I blinked at the unexpected question.

“I-Is it because you figure out things like Sherlock Holmes?” she quickly added. She seemed to be saying things accidentally out of nervousness. I couldn’t help but smile at how cute it was.

“Let’s see... You’re a student at Oki High, but you were originally from Kanto, not Kansai. You moved to Kyoto around half a year ago. You came to this shop to have something appraised, but it doesn’t belong to you. That’s what I can tell so far.”

“W-Wow.” Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped.

“Anyone could figure out as much. You’re wearing the Oki school uniform and you have a Kanto accent.”

She looked down at herself, startled. “Wait, but, how did you know I moved half a year ago?”

“That was just my intuition. You don’t seem like you just moved here, but you don’t seem too accustomed to being here either. So, I guessed that you moved here during summer vacation.”

“Then, how did you know that I want to appraise something that doesn’t belong to me?”

“A high school student wouldn’t own the kind of thing that you’d get appraised here. So it’s natural to assume that it probably belongs to a grandparent. On top of that, you seem hesitant to get it appraised—because it’s not yours. Am I mistaken?”

She froze, lost for words.

“However, you’re currently in desperate need of money. That’s why you brought that here without permission, right?”

She looked at me, her face pale. “H-How...” Her voice gave out in the middle of her question.

“If you had permission, then you wouldn’t be hesitating.” *It’s exceedingly obvious, isn’t it?* “The fact that you’re displaying hesitation suggests that you’re not the kind of girl who would sell off her family’s things. But the reality is that you’re here. So, you must be truly pressed for money. You’re being cornered by something. Am I correct?”

She seemed to be too shocked to remember to blink or close her gaping mouth.

Ueda, who had apparently been listening to the conversation, gave an exasperated sigh and said, “Hey, Kiyotaka, you’re scaring the poor thing. I keep telling you to stop that. This is why you’ll always be ‘Holmes.’”

His words brought me back to my senses. “Oh, sorry. I got carried away,” I apologized, surprised by what I’d done. It was rare for me to say my thoughts aloud.

The girl shook her head. “D-Don’t worry about it.” She looked like she wanted to say she was okay, but it clearly wasn’t true.

Feeling bad, I changed the subject. “By the way, I’m not called Holmes because of Sherlock. It’s just a nickname.”

I’d been given the nickname back when I was a child fascinated by Sherlock Holmes. It was an embarrassing nickname to have at this age, but at the time, being called Holmes had made me happy. And now, I was so accustomed to it that I felt neither happy nor embarrassed about it.

“B-Because you can figure out anything, right?” she asked.

It’d be rude to the original Holmes for people to think that. I’m only an apprentice appraiser, after all. “No, because my surname is Yagashira, written with the characters for ‘home’ and ‘head.’ So it’s more like they’re calling me ‘Homes,’” I said, pointing at the nametag on my chest.

She blinked and brought her face closer to see. After mouthing the words “Yagashira,” “home,” and “Holmes,” she said and nodded, “Oh, I get it.” She seemed disappointed.

“That’s not all,” Mieko said excitedly. “Dear Kiyotaka’s so smart, he’ll be attending graduate school at Kyoto University this spring.”

The girl looked surprised. “Th-That’s incredible.”

Seeing her genuinely impressed made me feel bad again. “That’s not what’s incredible about me.”

“Huh?”

“My father and grandfather both went to Kyoto University, so I always wanted to go there too.”

“Okay...”

“However, I didn’t pass the entrance exams, because I was always playing with my grandfather.” Every time there was a long break, I traveled abroad with my grandfather instead of studying. Kyoto U wasn’t so lax that you’d be able to get in right after high school with that little effort. “So I decided to go to Kyoto Prefectural University.”

“What? Kyoto Prefectural University?”

“Yes.” I nodded.

I might have barely been able to make it into Kyoto U, but I’d chosen KPU to be safe. I liked the location because it was close to the botanical gardens, and it was also possible to get a curator certification there. Also, my girlfriend at the time had said, “You don’t know if you’ll get into Kyoto U, so you’re deciding between that and KPU? You should choose KPU, then. I’m going to Notre Dame, so KPU is closer.” Honestly, that had been a major factor in my decision. Laughably, she’d dumped me a month into university.

I ended up remembering something unpleasant. Back then, I should’ve gone against the odds and tried for Kyoto U. But there was no use in regretting it, so I’d changed my way of thinking and decided to enjoy my time at KPU. I could just go to Kyoto U for grad school.

After reflecting on the past, I asked the girl for her name, which turned out to be Aoi Mashiro. Having determined that she lived in the Shimogamo area, I decided it was about time to get to the point. I looked her in the eye and said,

“Aoi, this store doesn’t purchase from minors. You’ll need to be accompanied by a legal guardian or have formal authorization.”

All of the tension left her when I said that. She also seemed relieved. *She really is honest*, I thought, my face relaxing into a smile. *Even if she had been able to sell to Kura, I’m sure she would’ve refused at the last minute, saying, “I can’t sell it after all. Sorry.”*

But after seeing her eyes light up at the good-quality Taikan reproduction and stare in fascination at the Shino tea bowl, I had to wonder what she’d brought in. “However, appraisals are allowed. Would you show me what you brought? It might be something valuable, if it’s coming from you.”

“Huh?”

I led her to the sofa in the cafe area and went into the kitchenette. While I was there, I listened to her conversation with Mieko.

“Where are you from, dear? Tokyo?”

“No, I’m from Omiya in Saitama.”

“Was it a job transfer?”

“Yes. My grandfather passed away two years ago, so my family wanted to move in with my grandmother to keep her company. My father’s transfer request finally went through, and we moved here last summer.”

I brewed a café au lait and placed the cup in front of her. “Here you are. Our store always provides complimentary beverages for our customers. It’s something I like to do.”

She smiled happily at the sight of the drink.

“It was hot last summer when you moved here, no?” I asked, sitting down across from her.

“It was, but it’s the same in Saitama. I was surprised by how cold the winter is here, though.” She gently picked up the cup, brought it to her mouth, and smiled fondly. I could tell she thought it was delicious. She was a very expressive girl.

As we talked, she glanced at me. She seemed to be wondering where I was

from, since I didn't speak the Kyoto dialect.

"Oh, I've always lived in Kyoto. I'm sure it's hard to tell since I speak formally."

She choked on her drink.

"Oh Holmes, when will you stop that?" asked Ueda. "You're scaring poor Aoi, right?"

"Y-Yeah. Is he always like this?"

"No, I usually take care to keep my thoughts to myself. I wonder why today is different." *Really, why?* I tilted my head. If it were Ueda or Mieko, I could understand, but it was unusual for me to express my true thoughts to a girl I was meeting for the first time. *In fact, it's possible that I never even did so with my ex-girlfriend who dumped me within a month of university starting. Perhaps that was why she dumped me in the first place. But anyway.* "Aoi, could you show me what you brought?"

"Oh, okay." She nodded and handed over the paper bag.

Ueda and Mieko eagerly looked over.

"Lessee!"

"There's two things!"

"Ah, hanging scrolls," I said, my heart beating a little faster as I took them out of the bag. Upon unrolling the first one, I was lost for words. It was a striking painting of Bodhidharma with intense eyes. "It's a Zen painting by Ekaku Hakuin. Now this is a surprise—it's genuine." My voice rose with excitement. Who would've thought I'd encounter a genuine Hakuin work like this?

"Never heard of Ekaku Hakuin, but I've seen this painting somewhere before. This here's the real thing, then?" Mieko asked gleefully.

I nodded. "Ekaku Hakuin was a Zen priest in the mid-Edo period. He is regarded as the reviver of the Rinzai school."

"The reviver of...what?"

"Rinzai is one of the sects of Zen Buddhism. In short, he was a major player in the revival of a declining Zen school."

“Oh, I see.”

“Hakuin preached Zen teachings in an easy-to-understand way and was named the father of the revival. He was so renowned that it was even said, ‘Suruga Province has two things too great for it: Mount Fuji and Hakuin of Hara,’ comparing his greatness to the likes of Mount Fuji.” I looked back down at the hanging scroll. “This really is a surprise. A Bodhidharma in good condition—a stunning one at that.”

“Hey, Holmes, how much for this one?” Ueda interjected.

“Hmm. In the realm of two point five million yen, I’d say.”

“T-Two point five million?” Aoi squeaked. Her face stiffened in shock.

“Let’s take a look at the other one.” I couldn’t contain my excitement. *What will I encounter this time?*

“Oh, I think that one is by the same person. It’s not Bodhidharma, though.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” I unrolled the scroll and my eyes widened in surprise. It rendered me speechless.

“Oh, this one’s a baby. Cute, eh?” remarked Ueda.

“Huh, so Hakuin drew this kind of thing too?” asked Mieko.

Their voices sounded like they were coming from far away. The painting was indeed of a baby sleeping peacefully.

“What’s up, Holmes?” asked Ueda.

“Ah, it’s nothing. I...have seen a Hakuin painting of an infant before, but this one is new to me.” My hands trembled as I held the unfamiliar scroll. The thought that a Hakuin painting of a baby could have remained in the care of an ordinary household without ever being shown to the world was absurd. Preconceptions would say that such a thing was impossible. And yet the painting was undeniably real.

“Is it really that great?” Ueda asked, seeming curious about its monetary value.

“Yes. I...don’t think I can put a price on it,” I murmured.

“Huh?” The girl was bewildered.

“Aoi, who does this hanging scroll belong to?”

“It’s...my late grandfather’s. He was an avid collector of antiques.”

This masterpiece must’ve found its way to her family by chance. Miracles like that happened sometimes with antiques. I didn’t want to be nosy, but it felt like fate, so I decided to ask about her situation.

“I see. This is a completely unrelated question, but are you so in need of money that you’d sell your grandfather’s belongings?”

She cast her eyes down, looking sincerely ashamed. “It’s for the bullet train fare. I really need to go back to Saitama.”

“Oh yes, spring vacation is coming up,” said Mieko. “You must want to see your friends, right? But wouldn’t it be better to ask your mom?”

I held my index finger in front of my mouth. Mieko hastily shut her mouth and shrugged.

The bullet train fare... “Did something happen?”

The girl hung her head and bit her lip. After a little while, she opened her mouth to speak, and at the same time, tears spilled from her eyes. “L-Last month, my boyfriend said he wanted to break up. A-At first, I accepted it. We couldn’t see each other much because we were so far apart, so it was only natural that his feelings would fade away...even though it was unbearable for me...”

I knew it. For a girl of her age, a boyfriend could mean the whole world to her. If she wanted to go back to her hometown for a reason she couldn’t discuss with her parents, it would have to be a relationship issue. But the fact that she said she “accepted it” left an impression on me. She was probably always giving up and accepting unwanted outcomes. When her family moved and she had to leave behind the people she knew and loved, she accepted it without a single complaint. Even when her boyfriend broke up with her, she forced herself to accept it. But if she already accepted it, why was she bringing it up again?

“But it looks like he started going out with another girl right away. And that

girl...is my best friend. I found out the other day.”

I nodded in understanding. She had said “best friend,” not simply “friend.” It showed just how important that girl was in her life. *Her boyfriend and her best friend...* From an adult’s point of view, it may seem trivial. But in her eyes, she’d lost everything: the place where she’d grown up, the school she’d worked hard to get into, her friends, and her boyfriend. She’d accepted that she had no choice, but losing her last bastion—her best friend—was too much to bear. She couldn’t ask her parents for help because it would sound like she was blaming them for moving. Driven into a corner, she’d seen our store’s sign that said “We buy and appraise.” It must’ve reminded her of her late grandfather’s collection, which had seemingly been forgotten in storage. The more patient and enduring a child has been, the more likely they are to suddenly snap and do something bold.

“I see, so you wanted to rush back.” I nodded.

Mieko smiled sympathetically and said, “That’s understandable. But what will you do when you go back?”

The girl clammed up and looked down. “I...I want to see for myself. And I’ve got a lot of things to say to them! I want to tell them how awful they are, and that I’ll never forgive them! Because it really is horrible! It’s too cruel!” She broke down in tears as if a dam had burst.

She must’ve wanted to cry like this all along, but she’d been holding back. It was the same for me, but in my case, I never did cry. I turned the situation into a lighthearted, funny story and acted unaffected. I did everything I could to maintain my pride when really, I was so broken on the inside that I couldn’t go back to normal. If only I’d been able to cry like this back then...

My heart ached as I saw myself in her. I gently put my hand on her head and said, “Aoi, please look at this painting you brought—the one of the baby.”

Still sobbing, she looked up at the baby drawn with gentle, curved lines. It was asleep, but it also looked like it was smiling.

“Do you know about Hakuin?” I asked.

She shook her head. She’d said that her late grandfather was a collector, so

there were probably quite a few antiques in her house. It was still surprising that out of them, she'd chosen this treasure to bring in.

"As I said earlier, Hakuin was a priest so renowned that he was compared to the likes of Mount Fuji. However, there was a time when he'd lost all his honor."

"Huh?"

"When Hakuin lived at Shoin Temple, there was an incident where a daughter of one of the temple's supporters became pregnant. The father interrogated the daughter as to whose child it was, and in a panic, she recalled that her father revered Hakuin and lied that it was his. She thought that he would calm down if she named Hakuin as the father. However, her father was enraged, and when the baby was born, he took it to Hakuin and shoved it at him, declaring, 'You're a horribly corrupt priest, getting my daughter pregnant. Now take this child.'"

"Wow... What did Hakuin do?"

"Even though the accusation was completely false, Hakuin took the baby without giving any excuses. After that, the people scorned him as 'the corrupt priest,' while he desperately searched for a wet nurse so that he could raise the child. The girl who gave birth to the child couldn't bear to see this. Tormented by her sins, she tearfully told her father the truth. Shocked, he went straight to Hakuin to apologize. Hakuin merely said, 'Ah, so this child does have a father,' and returned the child without a single word of criticism towards the daughter or her father. Now, how do you think Hakuin really felt about this situation?"

She stared at the hanging scroll through teary eyes and squinted.

"Perhaps the answer can be found in this painting?" I said.

The painting of the baby was overflowing with love. Hakuin hadn't reluctantly taken in the child; he'd accepted the entire situation with all his heart. He may have found nothing but joy in holding the baby in his arms and returning it to its real parents. And then, he had recorded his love for the baby in this painting.

The girl burst into tears again, seeming to understand. I could sense her remorse and inner conflict. *If I return this hanging scroll to her and let her go,*

I'm sure she'll never come here again out of shame for her actions. I'll never see her again. This girl is interested in antiques, has a good eye, and possesses immense potential...

Before I knew it, I'd asked, "Aoi, would you like to work here?"

3

"And that's how you came to work here," Holmes said in a nostalgic tone.

Thinking back to that time gave me mixed feelings, so I couldn't say anything.

"At this point, I really think it was fate that our sign caught your eye, embarrassing as it sounds." With a faraway look in his eyes, he gazed out the window at the standing floor sign that said "Do you have any antiques hidden away at home? We buy and appraise."

"Actually, I sometimes wonder if my grandpa brought us together. I was his first grandchild, so he spoiled me a lot. Before he passed away, he often said, 'I'll give all of my treasures to you, Aoi.'"

"I see." Holmes nodded. "I'd be very happy if he was our matchmaker."

"Same."

Three years and five months had passed since then. Whether that was long or short, I didn't know. But what I did know was that my life had changed greatly.

"I feel comfortable leaving the store in your hands while I'm away now," he said.

"No, I still have a long way to go." I shrank back.

"I'll be gone again for a while starting tomorrow, so please take care of the place." He bowed.

"Okay," I said, still feeling unworthy. "The manager and I will do our best in your absence, so you should do your best with your training and mentoring Ensho too. To be honest, as your best apprentice, it's frustrating because it feels like Ensho is taking you away from me...but I'm rooting for him too."

"My best apprentice?" Holmes chuckled.

"I am, aren't I?" *I need to make it clear that I won't let Ensho have that spot.*

"No." He shook his head.

"Huh?"

"You're my partner," he said, taking my hand and placing a kiss on the back of it.

My heart skipped a beat.

"Is it wrong for me to think that way?" he asked, looking up at me.

I was rendered speechless. *Kyoto guys really are unfair.*

And so ended our peaceful summer.

Afterword

Thank you for reading. I'm Mai Mochizuki.

As I wrote in the foreword, the story has been speeding along thus far, so for this eleventh volume, I decided to stop and take a look back. In addition to the truth behind past events, I included Ensho's feelings and Aoi's fateful first meeting from Kiyotaka's perspective. It really does feel like a summer vacation episode, and I think it turned out to be a warm collection of stories.

Next time is a detective episode, so it may be a little on the hard-boiled side.

Now then, Iyuki, the teahouse featured in this volume, exists in real life. The manager of Daimaru Kyoto, who I met through volume ten, invited me there for the sake of future reference. There, I had my first-ever teahouse experience. I didn't want to keep it to myself, so I mirrored it here to share it with all of my readers. I'm truly thankful for the wonderful experience.

Also, BLUE BOOKS cafe KYOTO, which Aoi and Kaori visited, opened in the autumn of 2018. It's a lovely place, so I asked for permission to use it as a setting. Thank you very much.

Once again, I'm truly thankful for all of the connections surrounding myself and this series. Thank you all so much.

This time, I've included a bonus short story after this which depicts Kiyotaka and Aoi on a date in Kitayama. I hope you'll enjoy it.

Mai Mochizuki

Short Story: A Date in Kitayama

"I was worried because of how hot it was this year, but they're blooming beautifully," Holmes remarked as he walked at a leisurely pace, gazing happily at the colorful assortment of flowers. There were tropical water lilies, towering sunflowers, petunias, zinnias, fountain grasses, cannas, and morning glories.

"Yes, they really are beautiful."

We were at the Kyoto Botanical Gardens, an enormous park twenty-four hectares in size. Walking around it was like a light workout.

"It's our first time coming here together, isn't it?" Holmes asked as if he'd just realized.

"Yes." I nodded. "I come here a lot by myself, though."

He looked at me and smiled. "It's close to the university, after all."

Kyoto Botanical Gardens was only a stone's throw away from Kyoto Prefectural University, which I now attended.

"It is, but also, ever since the time you gave me an annual pass, I've been buying it myself every year."

It was on Christmas Eve when I was seventeen, making it about three years ago. When he gave me the annual pass for the gardens as well as an associate card for the Kyoto City Museum of Art, I was surprised, but at the same time, I couldn't help but giggle at how fitting the gifts were. Remembering it made me feel a little nostalgic.

"I was utterly incompetent back then," he said with a sigh, staring into space as he walked half a step ahead of me.

"Incompetent?" *Did he think they were bad presents? Thinking back, ever since we started dating, his gifts have been so lavish that I was reluctant to accept them. Maybe it's because he regrets that Christmas Eve.* I tugged his sleeve and he turned around, seeming confused. "I couldn't help but laugh back

then, but I was really happy about both of the presents,” I said honestly. Holmes had given me many opportunities to see plants and beauty. Despite my initial surprise, I now thought of it as an amazing gift with immeasurable worth.

He stared blankly at me for a second before chuckling and saying, “I see. I’m glad you liked them.”

“Wait, did I get the wrong idea?”

“Who knows?” He laughed and started walking again.

I tilted my head.

*

It was 4 p.m. when we left the gardens through the Kitayama exit.

“It’s a little early for dinner, so shall we have tea?” Holmes asked.

“Yes, let’s.”

“We could go to a cafe near the park. It would also be fun to walk down Kitayama Street and look for a new place. There’s also Kitayama Kochakan, which I know you and Kaori like. Where would you like to go?”

“I do want to explore new cafes, but I’ve been wanting to go to Kitayama Kochakan with you for a while now.”

“Let’s head towards Kitayama Kochakan, then, and check out the cafes on the way.”

“Okay.”

We held hands and walked west on Kitayama Street in the shade of the trees along the road. The last time we’d been here was a winter night, and the church had been lit up with beautiful lights, but now it had leafy green trees instead. It felt very refreshing, and since it was early evening, the heat had died down as well. I heard hymns coming from the chapel as we passed by. The sign in front of the open gate said “Everyone is welcome.”

“Oh!” I stopped. “I remember this place.”

“Yes, this is where I gave you the annual pass for the botanical gardens.”

“Right.” I nodded and found myself stepping into the courtyard.

After getting caught up in Izumi and Tachibana's conflict and somehow managing to get the situation under control, Holmes and I had come to this church, lured in by the hymns.

We decided to sit on the same bench we had that day, the one at the very end. Perhaps because it was evening, there was no one in the courtyard besides us.

"This place brings back painful memories too," Holmes said with a sigh.

"Why?" I asked. He blinked. "Were you sad back then because Izumi and Tachibana reaffirmed their engagement?" I continued.

As we were talking on this bench, Izumi and Tachibana had come over, holding hands after having reconciled. Thinking back, Holmes had seemed disappointed at the time, his hand pressed to his forehead. It was before we had started dating, so perhaps he'd been thinking something about Izumi, his ex.

I looked at Holmes and saw that he was hanging his head the same way he had that day, with his hand on his forehead. "Umm, Holmes?"

"What are you talking about, Aoi? Of course that's not it." He sounded slightly upset, which was unusual for him.

"Sorry, that was a weird thing to say," I apologized, bewildered. *Maybe I was right and he didn't want to hear it? If so, that was insensitive of me. But it's already in the past, so I feel like it should be fine...and besides, he's dating me now...* I looked down, starting to feel depressed.

Holmes squeezed my hand. "You really are too oblivious. And when I said I was incompetent earlier, I wasn't talking about the choice of gift."

"Huh?"

"I gave you the annual pass because I wanted to go to the botanical gardens with you, but in the end, I never got to go with you that year. That's why I said that."

"R-Really?"

"As for why this church brings back painful memories... If you knew how I felt

back then...”

“Huh?” I looked up and silently awaited his next words. My heart was beating a mile a minute.

“No, never mind.”

“What is it? I want to know.”

“Well, all right. Let me say to you what I wanted to say that night.”

“O-Okay!” I unconsciously straightened my back.

Holmes hugged me tightly and said, “I love you.”

Startled, my eyes widened. As his face approached mine, I closed my eyes, still disoriented. I felt his bangs brush against my forehead, and then our lips touched.

He placed a hand on my forehead and peered into my face. “Years later, I finally got my revenge,” he said, grinning mischievously.

I looked down, embarrassed. “Back then, I thought there was no way you’d ever choose me, so I tried not to fall in love with you. That’s why I’m really happy now. I can’t believe I can be with you like this.”

“You can’t say that, Aoi,” he said, his forehead dropping to my shoulder.

“Huh? What did I say wrong?”

“All of it.”

“All of it...?”

The gospel music coming from the church was the same that we had heard once upon a time, and it felt like it was connecting our past and present selves.



Ensho and Rikyu Takiyama
at the Yanagihara Estate



Takeshi Yagashira and Kaori Miyashita at Kura

Translator's Corner

Thank you for reading volume 11 of *Holmes of Kyoto*! When I first looked through this volume and saw the lengthy flashback to the volume 1 prologue, I was hit with a sense of dread—not because I dislike flashbacks, but because I always get embarrassed looking at my past work. Volume 1 was officially released in English in 2020, but I actually first translated that prologue back in 2018 for the Manga Translation Battle. I did clean it up for the official release, but still, rereading my four-year-old translation made me want to die. *Holmes of Kyoto* is the longest series I've worked on so far, though, so this flashback-filled volume was a very nostalgic experience for me too.

Anyway, translation notes!

In chapter 1, at Eikan-do Temple, Holmes says: “Fujiwara no Sekio spent time here for recuperation purposes. It's said that he wrote the poem about himself, to say that his life would scatter like the autumn leaves without bathing in the sunlight or receiving the sacred halo.” For those unfamiliar with religious art, the halo referred to here is a circle of light that surrounds the head or body of a holy person, or, in some cases, a ruler or hero, in paintings and statues. In other words, “receiving the sacred halo” is a metaphor for attaining glory or enlightenment.

Then in chapter 2, after playing Tora Tora, Holmes says: “By the way, some places use Kiyomasa Kato instead of Watonai.” The book only explains that Watonai is from a story about the Chinese Ming Dynasty, but the actual story is *Kokusenya Kassen* (The Battles of Coxinga), a famous play written by Monzaemon Chikamatsu. The other figure mentioned, Kiyomasa Kato, was a real feudal lord who fought many battles and was rewarded generously for his efforts.

In chapter 4, when Ensho is flipping through Holmes's planner, he finds that Holmes marked his 7 Stars departure date with a “cutesy flower symbol.” You may have already seen this symbol in anime and manga—it's a spiral with round

flower petals drawn around it, and it is typically used to praise school kids when they do well on tests.



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Holmes of Kyoto: Volume 11

by Mai Mochizuki

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